松智洋
PRESENTED BY Tomohiro Matsu
なかじまゆか
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パパいうことを聞きなさい！
Listen to me, girls. I am your father!
スーパーダッシュ

六畳一間だけど
温もりだけは満載だね！
仁村 浩一
Nimura Kouichi
小鳥遊 美羽
Takanashi Miu
小鳥遊 空
Takanashi Sora
瀬川 祐太
Segawa Yuuta
小鳥遊 ひな
Takanashi Hina
織田 莱香
Oda Raika
佐古 俊太郎
Sako Shuntarou

「信頼された……ってことかなぁ」
「叔父さん、なにか言いました？」
「いや、空ちゃん、なんでもないよ」
「ウソ、ぜったいニヤニヤしてたっ」

パパいうことを聞きなさい！

Listen to me, girls.
I am your father!

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RAZY

祝！"パパのいうことを聞きなさい！"発刊！

未熟者ですが、宜しければ今後とも
よろしくお願いします！

2009.12.　ながじまりか

Prologue

Though it’s not my place to say this, but my——Segawa Yuuta’s—— life is full of trials and tribulations.

Of course, I don’t really mean that in such an exaggerated way, but in the eyes of normal people, it wouldn’t be wrong to say I am currently going through something extremely rare.

I had just learnt how to differentiate right from wrong when I lost both my parents in an accident, and I was brought up by my very energetic older sister. It’s possible that my life of difficulties had begun on a one-way trip at that point.

And now, studying in university, theoretically I should be living by myself in my own apartment— but now, my apartment has a group of three girls', composed of a middle school student, an elementary school student, and a kindergartener.

Hm? Why did it end up like this? It’s kind of hard to say though.

If I really had to explain things, it’d be a very long story.

If you asked me how I felt about such a situation, it’d be that girls of these ages were creatures extremely hard to comprehend.

And I am the father of these three hard-to-understand creatures.

“You can’t enter the toilet!”

The cries of an elementary school student echoed in this cheap apartment early in the morning.

I’m saying this first; I did not do anything that would get me arrested.

I purely wanted to enter the room equipped with the toilet, the shower and the sink to make use of them.

But even though I had no ill intentions, I was being lectured by a girl with golden hair and twin tails, whose height was only up to my chest.

She probably inherited her golden hair from her mother, and her looks would be that of a young idol. I expect tons of guys would be more than willing to pay if we could charge to see her angry face. But it’s a different case altogether since we’re family, and all I can say is how hard it can be to live with a ten-year-old girl.

“I told you before, didn’t I, you can’t enter a toilet for a period of time after a girl has used it. Please take note of the basic courtesy guys should have!”

“But Miu-chan, I only want to wash my face…”

“Just bear with it.”

That’s just unreasonable; I’ll be late for class if I wait any more.

Besides, my goal isn’t the toilet itself, but the sink that’s next to it.

Forget it; I’ll just buy some flower-scented air fresheners on the way back – I thought as I walked towards the dining table with my face a little oily.

At the dining table, the angel of my household – three-year-old kindergartener – Hina, was sitting upright.

How innocent and cute and sensible, plus she wouldn’t say anything like “you can’t go to the toilet”.

“Oi-tan has an afro~ Afro~~”

My three-year-old niece started laughing as I prepared to sit down.

Kids of this age all seem to be like this, but either way it wasn’t that funny to begin with.

My hair was extremely messy because I had just woken up – she was laughing so happily just because of this.

“Hina, don’t laugh at me anymore. By the looks of things I might have to go to my university lectures with this hairstyle.”

Yup, it’s all because of your older sister stopping me from using the sink that it’s like this now.

“Thanks for waiting— breakfast is here—”

The unreasonable sister served the food.

Today’s menu is toast and salad, nothing more.

It’s quite the simple meal.

Not only that, the toast was burnt slightly in some places while the salad was just sitting in the bowl – if canned tuna was going to be added, it’d have been better if they at least got rid of the oil.

Well comments aside, it’s better than nothing.

“Onee-chan was planning to make corn soup, but it looks like it failed – that’s why breakfast looks like this now—”

“Ah, you’re mean! Miu, don’t say anything unnecessary!”

A voice of discontent came from the room, followed by a 2nd year middle school girl with mid-length hair, Sora-chan.

It wouldn’t be wrong to say that she’s the head of the household.

I understand that it’s a little strange coming from me – but in this household, I don’t even have a little bit of dignity as a parent.

“Really, Onii-chan, at least wash your face before eating.”

See, I got scolded again. Ahh, I told you it was because of Miu-chan already.

Our family of four sat down around the table to begin our meal, without giving me any time to defend myself.

“Then, I’m digging in.”

On the cue of the eldest sister Sora-chan, our family began to eat our breakfast.

“Hina wants strawberry jam—!”

“I got it, I’ll give it to you now but you can’t put on too much—”

“Onee-chan, I already said that the salad was enough for me—”

“No–way, you must finish up the toast… eh? Ahh, really! I already said not to put on too much jam!”

“Yaaa— sticky and gooey—”

“Ahh, really, stay still and don’t move…”

Crash!

“Ah, Hina just knocked the milk–”

“Ahhh, this is bad! It’s on her uniform!”

“Onee-chan, here’s the dishcloth!”

“Thanks, Miu, wipe that area.”

Early in the morning and it’s chaotic as hell.

Just last month, this room only had the sounds of the television and the sound of me eating my meals.

Besides, I originally had my doubts about the needs of having to eat a proper breakfast……

“I say, Onii-chan! Stop daydreaming and help us!”

“Right~ Right~”

Even though the eldest sister Sora-chan is just in middle school, but she always tries her best, and ever since we began living together I’ve always been lectured like this. So I could only hurriedly pull out a few tissues and helped clean the results of Hina’s breakfast.

“Speaking of which, Oji-san, you’ve got some milk on your shirt too.”

“Eh? Are you kidding?!”

“Ah, hold on a moment. I’ll wipe it off for you, please don’t move around.”

Even though the second sister Miu-chan is only in elementary school, her mannerisms are just like an adult’s.

It’s a complex feeling to have her wipe my clothes like this.

Ah, but it’s not like that kind of guilty feeling……

“Oi-tan, Oi-tan!”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Hina?”

Lastly, is the youngest sister, three-year-old Hina.

She is my sister’s daughter, and the only one who is related to me by blood.

“Oi-tan, your hair is an afro!”

“You said this just now……”

I've been spending such lively mornings with these girls for almost two weeks as of today.

Even though I wouldn't say I'm used to it, but by now it's already become a daily routine in my house.

"Oji-san, are you working today too?"

Miu-chan asked after she wiped the milk stain off my shirt.

"Yup, I'll be returning home for awhile after class before going."

"Then, everyone can have dinner together tonight."

Sora-chan seemed to be slightly happy as she said that.

"Hina wants hamburg steak!"

"Really, that's all Hina ever eats."

"Okay~ then what recipe should I challenge this time—"

"Eh? O-Onee-chan's cooking?"

"Sora… i-if possible, let's just get takeaways…"

"Hina likes to eat takeaways—"

"I-- I won't screw up this time! Really! Absolutely! I mean it!"

The memory of a dark matter hamburg steak was stirred from our minds.

"Okay! We'll take the chance today to go to a restaurant!"

"Ah, it's the shop next to the university, right?"

"Ice cream~ buy ice cream on the way back~"

"Y-you guys……"

Sora-chan looked angry, with her hands trembling slightly.

"I will DEFINITELY make it extremely delicious, so resign yourselves!"

The milk carton in her hand was squeezed flat with a pop.

White liquid flew all over the place.

“Ah –Onee-chan! It’s stained the clothes again!”

“Waaah!”

“Ahahahaha! Oi-tan, afro afro! Onee-chan is fun!”

We began the second round of cleaning in a panic. At this moment, I took a glance at my watch and my face turned green instantly.

“This is bad! Hina’s going to be late for kindergarten!”

“Eh—!”

“Eat faster! As your guardian, I won’t forgive such things as not eating your breakfast!”

I announced this – even though I myself never had the habit of having breakfast until two weeks ago.

“Okay—!”

Hina answered in a cute way as she munched on her toast.

“I got it, Oji-san.”

Miu-chan, with the face of an idol, answered me as she began putting toast and salad into her tiny mouth. Just how does she manage to stuff so much food in?

“…… What’s that about, that guardian thing?”

Lastly the eldest sister Sora-chan said as though unhappy, sat down by the table and began eating her breakfast at top speed.

I began eating my toast quickly as well after making sure of the girls’ conditions.

After breakfast I’ll bring Hina to kindergarten first, and then head to university for classes before going to work……

I would never have imagined that such a life would suddenly happen to me.

Also, who could ever have imagined that I would understand the feelings of a father at my age?

The story of the four of us – living together in an apartment the size of 6 tatami mats——

Began, just like that.

Chapter 1 - Yuuta Goes to College

I opened my eyes in an inexplicable daze, and found that I was in an unfamiliar room.

“You’re finally awake, Segawa Yuuta-kun, first year Japanese major.”

A glaring light that pierced my eyes shone in front of me. It seemed that a desk lamp or something was shone on me, while a faint shadow could be seen behind the light. However, why does this person know my name? And even my major?

“Uuu…… Urgh!”

At the instant I started to say something, a nauseous feeling suddenly came from my gut.

I feel terrible…… And my whole mind is blank, I couldn’t think of anything.

“You’re just a first year, but you drank until you almost puked, you really have guts.”

The guy spoke again. Although he spoke in a domineering tone, his words were rather high-pitched, and the silhouette behind the light looked quite wide as well.

“However, you really know how to get into trouble.”

“Err…… I…… Did I do anything?”

“Did you do anything, you say!? There is no answer other than ‘yes’ for that question!”

The silhouette raised his voice which was already rather high-pitched.

“See for yourself!”

The man turned the desk lamp, shining it towards a corner in the dark room.

A female was slumped on the floor. Her long, slender legs extended on the floor, biting the long sleeve of her shirt, looking as though she would start making sobbing noises at any moment.

“Sob sob sob……”

She said that, she really said that. But her flat tone didn’t even have any emotion in it.

“Oda-kun, Oda-kun! Put in some more feeling! Didn’t we blow our cover just now because of this?”

The fatty hastily muttered instructions to the female just now (Though I could actually hear it clearly). The female turned her head to the side slightly, then……

“Sob sob sob……?”

“No, I’m not telling you to phrase it in a question!”

Though I’m not really sure about the situation, it seems that there’s a huge farce happening here.

“A- Anyway! First year, Segawa Yuuta!”

“Ah, yes!”

“When you were drunk, you did some shameful acts to Oda-kun over there. So you have to claim responsibility! And immediately!”

“Eh— !? I, I did such a thing!?”

How is that possible! It’s too unreasonable! Even if I did get dead drunk……

“Shameful acts……? I- I don’t remember at all!”

“Here, Oda-kun, what do you say about this?”

“…… Hmm?”

The female who was practicing her ‘sob sob sob’ at the side thought for a while after being urged by the fatty.

“…… No.”

……

“Erm, is this a trick by any chance?”

“Ah! He got suspicious so quickly! Oda-kun! You probably have something else to say, right!”

After the fatty finished saying that, the desk lamp that was facing me suddenly rose, and someone poked his head out from below.

“Sako-senpai, why don’t you give up already?”

The fellow who said that while placing the desk lamp that was on his head onto the floor, was a tall, slim man that looked rather handsome.

I think I saw his face somewhere before this……

“Yo! You’re Segawa, right? We’re quite unlucky.”

“Err……”

It seems that the handsome guy knows me.

“Eh? Don’t you remember me? Didn’t I sit beside you just before this?”

“Ah, I remember now! Let me think for awhile…… You’re Nimura!”

Declaring something like ‘Bingo!’, he winked while pointing at me.

“Wait a sec, what’s with this situation! I remember that I was at a welcome party…… E- eh?”

I tried to recall what occurred at the welcome party that I went to, but I could only remember up till the point I gulped down the beer in my glass.

“Hmph! It seems that you really don’t remember anything, Segawa Yuuta. You took off your clothes while you were drunk, running out to the streets naked, and even climbed up the decorations in the plaza.”

The fatty called Sako-senpai changed his stand, pointing at me again while saying that.

Anyways, isn’t this completely different from what he said just now?

“Not only that! You argued with the police in front of us, the people passing by…… ‘Don’t get close! If you come closer, you’ll force me to release the inner energy in my body! Ugh! No! Don’t force me to repeat the destruction and death again!’ and on the next instant, black smoke puffed out from your body! And then, your right hand slowly held the dark object at your groi— Uwaagh!?”

Smack! A clear sound interrupted Sako-senpai’s words all of a sudden.

“I detest obscene topics.”

It seemed like the ‘sob sob sob’ person flung a slipper at him.

“Oda-kun, don’t get in my way. Just a little more, us ‘RoRe’ can get a new member. Also, didn’t I tell you to use a paper fan when doing a tsukkomi?”

“Oh, that’s right.”

And then she hit her palm with her other fist as though she just understood something, and took out a paper fan from somewhere.

After that, she expressionlessly hit Sako-senpai with the paper fan repeatedly, sounds of the fan

hitting him rang clearly.

“Wa- Wai……! Wait a minute, I didn’t do anythi—!”

Thwack! Thwack!

“O- Oda-kun! Stop! Ahhh!”

“No. No. No.”

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

“Ahhh! No! There’s this strange feeling! Noooooo—!”

The fat senpai made a disgusting wail, then stopped moving.

For some reason, a satisfied smile was on his face, and along with the movement of him biting his thumb, gave people an eerie feeling.

“You two.”

The ‘sob sob sob’ person who expressionlessly lashed out with the paper fan turned over and said to us.

“Let me handle this. You guys have class tomorrow, right?”

Does that mean we can go back now?

“Oi, Segawa, let’s listen to her advice for now.”

“Mnn…… Alright.”

I glanced back at the ‘sob sob sob’ person who was expressionlessly tying the fat senpai up, and then we left the room.

When we came outside, it was of course already night time, as the welcome party was in the evening……

A large field was in front of my eyes. We were in front of a small concrete building, and there were two or three similar buildings nearby as well.

“What is this place?”

“This is the club building, didn’t someone already say that yesterday?”

That’s true, I think someone mentioned something about a club building yesterday during the student orientation after the opening ceremony when someone from the staff explained to us

about the various places on campus.

Tama Literary College where I'm attending from tomorrow on— the campus that's known as 'Tamabun', was built on a small slope, the highest place in the campus would be the field, the baseball field and the handball court.

Beside these fields would be the club building where the sports and cultural clubs are located.

Since most of the student orientation was about the things that would make people feel like sleeping, such as class contents, ways to study and the like, and also because of the constraints of time, we didn't have enough time to walk all over the campus, but it seems like the club building was mentioned at that time.

"So, were we in the clubroom of a club just now……"

We walked along the road on an April night that still had a hint of coldness, walking past the club building under the streetlights, walking towards a path that goes throughout the campus with sakura trees all around, and arrived at the slanting slope. At this time, Nimura turned his head around, looking at the building that couldn't be seen now.

"Segawa, haven't you looked around the clubs yet?"

"…… Wasn't the opening ceremony just yesterday? Who would be so hasty to get into a club?"

Nimura said: "You're really an outsider." And shrugged.

"If you want to meet more girls, joining a club is the best way."

From this one sentence, it gave me some understanding about this guy's personality.

"But just joining a club wouldn't be enough, it must be a relaxed, but flashy and interesting club. The more interesting the club, the easier girls would gather."

"What in the world are you thinking of?"

"Listen to me, the ones that I recommend the most are the Skiing Club or the Tourism Club. Also, don't be so silly as to join the music oriented clubs. The practices required in those clubs are unexpectedly harsh and also expensive."

This guys is obviously just a first year new student like me, why is he so sure about these things?

It looks as though he's in college just to hit on girls.

And it might be true as well.

“By the way, who are those two people? Why am I back at the school? Wasn’t I supposed to be at the pub in front of the station instead……”

“Huh? You really don’t remember? You were dead drunk even before they changed places. Because of this, and also because I was beside you, they asked me to send you back home.”

“Eh…… Is that true?”

Really, really. Nimura nodded.

“How should I say this……. I’m really sorry for bothering you.”

“Never mind, just find some time to treat me to lunch.”

Would the things in the school canteen be okay? If he asks for more, I don’t think my wallet can take it.

“You’re really a masterpiece, getting drunk even though you’re just drinking non-alcoholic beer.”

“Eh……? Non-alcoholic?”

“Of course. Even though we’re already college students, most of us aren’t twenty yet. The senpais considered that as well.”

I only learned about this just now.

As the color and taste was the same as beer, I really thought I was drinking real beer.

“It’s when I was dragging you out to get a cab that I saw the senpai squatting down by the road just now.”

“…… Ah?”

“Don’t be doubtful, it’s true. Didn’t you see just now? She just went ‘sob sob sob’ like that by the road just now.”

She actually did that already, just now……. And on the streets?

“What were those people playing at?”

“How should I know? But they said that they’re from the ‘Road Observation Research Society’ or something like that. It seemed like they were trying to get new members like that.”

Getting new members? Wasn’t that just plain extorting people?

It’s best if I don’t have anything to do with those people.

“But she’s really a beauty, the sob sob sob person.”

“Eh…… Really? The room was really dark just now, so I didn’t really see her face.”

“That’s such a pity! She’s a beauty of model or idol level. She might already be someone from a company now.”

“I- Isn’t that a bit too exaggerated……”

Nimura’s words made me regret not having a closer look at her just now.

My determination to ‘not have anything to do with those people’ wavered.

“By the way, Segawa-kun.”

“Wha- what is it?”

Hearing Nimura suddenly add a –kun behind my name made me feel rather guarded.

“Is your house anywhere nearby? The last train left quite some time ago.”

That was how my encounter with Nimura went.

From that day on, that guy would always find a reason to stay at my house overnight, even bringing things like video games, mangas and the like here, and would return home after playing, eating and bathing.

According to him, his room is a place where he was going to invite girls to, so he didn’t want unnecessary things to be there.

But even so, does that mean you have to place your things here……

However, being able to make a friend as soon as I came to the college actually made me feel rather relieved as well.

‘Oh? It seems that you’ve found quite a nice friend.’

After some time, my sister called me.

From the opening ceremony till now, I didn’t speak to my sister through the phone for a month or so now.

“My room is gradually becoming more cramped because of that guy. Really, he even brought a futon over here recently.”

The rent of my room is about fifty thousand yen, including the management fees. Fortunately,

this is a five year old room, so the rent is quite reasonable. While at a corner of this cramped room, a futon was tidily arranged there. It was like that from the time Nimura went out.

Though people say that you can't judge a book by its cover, that guy's personality is actually quite similar to what he looks like, attentive, tidy, and he even cooks.

Every time he stayed here for the night, he would tidily keep the futon folded, and would even help me prepare breakfast as well.

Not only that, he would come and tidy up the house in the morning, going to his class after keeping his futon, and getting his futon back in the evening again.

In this age, if Nimura were a girl…… Such a thought would sometimes arise in my heart.

'He even gave you something for staying there, such a person is quite rare nowadays. Your friend called Nimura is probably quite friendly with women, right?'

"Ugh……"

'Guys are like women, the ones who can do the housework and can cook are more popular! I'm educating my husband in this direction as well. Yuuta, you should really learn from him and get a girlfriend soon. And then you can marry as soon as you graduate.'

"Hey….."

Sister is saying such unreasonable things again.

From some time before this, she would encourage me with things like 'get a girlfriend', 'hurry up and marry' and so on every two or three sentences.

The reason why she would say things like that is probably because of me.

To be more precise, it would be from the time that I started to keep my distance from sis.

About four years before this, my sister married.

Her husband is a rather plain office worker. Although I say that, that guy has some land in the city, and even uses his money on stocks, so he's a rather wealthy person.

Though I'm not sure where and how that guy met sis— to be exact, she just wouldn't tell me the reason. But after some vigorous effort on sis that was actually too lovey-dovey for other people, he successfully walked on the red carpet with sis.

To be honest, I objected strongly that time, and I couldn't even imagine that sis would actually think of marrying him.

After all, he's an Ojisan who's more than ten years older than sis, and he even divorced twice, having two kids from his two ex-wives.

Any person with common sense wouldn't just give their blessings to them just like that.

And to me, whose parents died long ago, my sister isn't just any 'sister', but an existence that is equal to parents.

With a dazzling appearance and an elegant personality, my sister was the dream girl of many people from primary school, and received confession letters three times a day, or would be confessed to behind a school building.

Every time I felt jealous and unknowingly turn harsh. Being such a devoted brother, how can I suppress the emotions that are like envy, jealousy and also pain? Impossible, I can't do that!

Just like that, these emotions still lingered in the depths of my heart.

Besides that, there are still other reasons that I decided to keep a distance from sis.

'Hina says that she wants to see her Oji-chan as well. Right, Hina-chan?'

Hina would be the girl that sis had with the detestable man that divorced twice.

She's probably sleeping in sis's lap right now.

"…… Isn't it impossible for a two year old to say that?"

'She's almost three now, and even two year olds can speak a lot nowadays. She could even say all the names of the animals that she saw on a show on TV! And she even said 'Thanks for your hard work, papa!' to Shingo yesterday as well! Isn't she great!'

I really don't get how great that is.

I remember that the last time I saw her was when she had her first birthday, so we haven't seen each other for two years now.

At that time, she was still a baby who'd just cry or sleep all day……

'Why don't you come home and play sometimes, I want Hina to remember your face faster as well, Yuuta.'

"My face, huh…… Never mind, I wouldn't want to trouble you and your family—"

'Yuuta, you're wrong.'

Sis interrupted in an unusually harsh tone.

‘After I married Shingo, I had two daughters already. Of course, we aren’t related by blood, and we haven’t lived together long enough for them to call me mother…… However, I’ve treated them as my true ‘family’. Just like Hina, they’re both my daughters.’

I could more or less imagine the expression on my sister’s face on the other side of the phone.

She would probably look somewhat angry, but with a hint of sorrow.

She would look like that every time I did something wrong.

‘Yuuta, it’s the same for you. No matter how far apart we are, you’re always my family.’

“……Sorry.”

‘It’s okay.’ Sister’s voice recovered its usual gentleness, and she said it to me.

Then she said: ‘If you have a person that you like after this and have a family, you’ll know that naturally.’ And hung up.

“A person I like, huh…..”

Is it because of that, that she would keep nagging me to get a girlfriend?

But…… That’s not a simple task.

For a person like me who just went to college for a month, and had one person who’s like a friend to me- Nimura Kouichi, it’s just too hard. I heaved a long sigh since I wouldn’t be overheard.

Ding dong!

The doorbell rang just at that moment as though it was waiting for me to finish my phone call with my sis. The apartment that I stayed at was a perfect location only five minutes away from the school on foot. In other words, this is a rather remote place close to the hills.

I could only think of one person who would come here other than my landlord or my sister.

I just ended a phone call with sis just now, so she’s definitely not here, while the landlord wouldn’t visit after ten at night unless there’s a huge problem.

That means it’s only that person left.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.”

After saying that, I opened the door.

“Segawa-kun~ Let me stay here for the night.”

As I expected, the visitor was indeed Nimura.

As though he returned to his own house, he snuck into the house, sitting down on his usual spot after placing the bags from the convenience stores on the table.

“Hey…… It seems that you’ve been here almost every day from this week.”

“That doesn’t matter. Here, have an ice cream as a gift.”

Just like that, Nimura would always bring some gifts here when he stays here for the night.

Would this be one of his secret techniques for his popularity with women?

Ah, about the things that I talked about just now…… Perhaps I should just ask for Nimura’s opinion.

…… No, never mind. I have a feeling that I would just get a cruel answer with absolutely no value for reference.

“Hmm? Segawa-chan, is there anything wrong?”

“…… Nothing much. That’s right, I’ll be taking the Häagen-Dazs then.”

“Ah! That’s mine! The Garigari popsicle is yours.”

“Do you think you can stay at someone’s house with just a Garigari popsicle?”

After saying that, I opened the expensive-looking crimson ice cream wrapping. After that, I tore off the plastic cover in it, licking the surface of the ice cream after that.

“Uwaa!? That’s so despicable! Are you a primary school student?”

“Heh heh~♪”

I glanced at Nimura who was starting to eat his Garigari popsicle bitterly, and started to enjoy the 300 yen ice cream.

The next day— the piercing noise of an alarm woke me from my sleep.

“Ugh…..”

The alarm clock that sis gave me when I moved here rang in an unbelievably loud sound. Sis, who was unexpectedly difficult to wake in the morning, used this alarm to wake up every morning at six when she was still schooling to prepare breakfast and bento, so obviously its volume is nothing to laugh at.

“Ugh…… Oh no, there’s class in the first period today…… Oi! Nimura, wake up!”

I said while using my foot to poke Nimura who was still sleeping like a log.

In the end, Nimura and I played video games until daybreak.

The game that we played was one that makes the players kick the other players off a high stage, called Smash Bros or something like that.

By the way, my record is 13 wins and 64 losses. Though the results are like this, I really improved quite a lot compared to the time I first played.

After all, I couldn’t even win once when I started playing the game, and was pummeled one-sidedly to the edge of the screen no matter how many times I played it.

“Wait, this isn’t time to think about this. Oi! Nimura, the first class starts in fifteen minutes!”

“Ah— …… I’m taking a break today~”

Lying on the floor, it didn’t look as though Nimura was going to get up, and he said it while waving his hand.

“Isn’t your attendance lacking?”

“That— is— why…… Segawa-kun, I’ll leave roll call to you~”

Seriously…… I’ll just ignore the guy who’s trying to fuse with the carpet then.

I speedily finished the preparations for class, and left after grabbing a piece of bread that I bought some time ago.

I walked down the metal stairs that would ring distractingly by the apartment, then hid the keys to the house below a potted plant beside the letterbox.

Nimura would always take the keys there and lock the door when he goes home, and put it back when he’s finished with it.

After I moved the potted plant back to its original spot, I walked out to the unpaved road in front of the apartment.

I entered the campus from the smallest entrance— the west door— and bought a can of milk coffee from the automatic vendor in front of the Welfare Society.

I used it to swallow the bread that I brought from home in one go, and that’s the end of my breakfast.

Just like that, when I walked to the sakura slope path where the May sakura trees had already wilted, and saw auditory room 3 that I was supposed to go today for my first class.

It seems that I wouldn't be late today.

When I walked into the classroom, it was unusually full of students.

The only students that would attend a Liberal Studies class that was arranged on the first period of Wednesday would be the first years who want to earn all their credits in their first year in college, the second years that are too free, and the third years who are really lacking credits, and are trying to get extra credits.

But the other reason would be because this class is said to be a bonus class that you could earn credits from as long as you attended it, which is probably why the rate of attendance is so high. Though Nimura was the one who found out about this and recommended me to join this course, the one who actually attended and even answered the roll call for him was me.

That's fine, as I would not forget to ask him for a gift in return for answering the roll call for him.

As I looked around the classroom to look for a suitable seat, the lecturer coincidentally walked into the room as well.

Without an alternative, I could only look for an empty seat to sit in.

"Hmm…… You……"

The instant I sat down, the person sitting next to me turned around.

"It's been awhile, how are you these days?"

"Eh……?"

I think my expression that time probably looked quite ridiculous.

However, I was only surprised because the other person suddenly spoke to me.

That's because she was quite a rarely seen beauty.

She was really at the top level that you could only see on television or in movies. She had curly hair and a flawless appearance, her eyes so large that it almost covered half of her face. And also…… absolutely huge breasts.

It seemed like the girl knew me, and talked to me in a friendly manner. No matter how dazed I was, a beauty like this, and what's more one with huge breasts, how is it possible that I would not remember?

“Err……. Ah……”

“Is it possible…… that you forgot?”

She tilted her head in confusion after saying that.

That action stirred my memories.

I recall that I’ve seen that response before somewhere.

That’s right, I remember that someone tilted her head somewhere in front of me, and she was biting on the sleeve of her shirt as well.

“Ah, ahh…… AHH! You’re the ‘sob sob sob’ person!”

I forgot that we were in a lesson, and stood up shouting.

After I was chased out of the classroom, I arrived at a bench between the sakura tree path and the school buildings with the ‘sob sob sob’ person.

As soon as it was recess, students would gather around here drinking beverages or smoking. Although there were quite a lot of spacious locations with benches throughout the campus, most of the first years would gather around here due to the location of classes.

But apart from us, there was almost nobody over there at that time.

That was quite understandable, since we were chased out of class halfway through the first period.

“Erm….. Sorry, it’s all because of me……”

“That’s okay, since the class isn’t as interesting as I thought.”

Isn’t as interesting as she thought….. Does that mean that this person seriously wanted to study in this course?

Thinking about myself, who attended the class because I heard that I can ‘get credits as long as I attend’, it made me feel rather embarrassed.

But the matter that I cared more about was, this rarely seen beauty had been expressionless since just now, her brows didn’t even move a centimeter.

Additionally, her finely chiseled features and the extent of her unchanging expression made me feel as though I was talking to a sculpture or something like that.

“I am Oda Raika, second year majoring _.”

“Eh……?”

“A self-introduction. People usually do that when they meet for the first time.”

“Err, ah…… th- that’s true! Erm, I’m……”

“I know, you’re Segawa Yuuta, first year Japanese literature major.”

She answered in my stead before I had the chance. Well, it didn’t look like she asked me to introduce myself after all, so it seems that she still clearly remembers about the night of the welcome party.

“A question. What does the ‘sob sob sob’ person mean?”

“Eh? Ah, oh…… It’s because those were the lines that you spoke that time, and I had a slight impression of it……”

“Sob sob sob?”

“Yes, that’s right! S- senpai, you did say it that time, didn’t you?”

“Oh, it was that time. Sako-senpai told me to say that…… Now I understand, that’s why I’m the ‘sob sob sob’ person.”

“S- sorry for giving you such a strange title.”

No matter what, calling another person the ‘sob sob sob person’, this awkward way of naming people left me tongue-tied. This type of naming seems like what those Ojisans who appears in mangas would say.

“So that’s why…… Sob sob sob…… sob sob sob…… Hmm.”

“Erm…… Oda-senpai?”

It looked as though senpai just understood something, nodding repeatedly.

“Oda-senpai…… Does that refer to me?”

“Err…… there isn’t anyone else, right?”

“Indeed. But I don’t like that way of calling, just call me Raika-chan.”

“Eh!? Calling you that as soon as I know you is too abrupt!”

“Really? Then just call me the ‘sob sob sob’ person.”

“That’s even stranger……”

Though I was the one who coined that, using that as a nickname seems to be a fundamental problem.

“Then what do you want to address me as?”

Senpai puffed out her cheeks and pouted, using her whole face to express her displeasure.

But there wasn’t even a hint of anger in her face.

It felt more like she was deliberately presenting an ‘I am angry’ act.

“Err….. Then, what about Raika-san?”

“Raika-san…… Nobody called me that before. Hmm, it seems nice.”

It looks like she likes it.

This person is quite a unique person, or to be precise, should I say ‘odd’……

I remember that she and the fat senpai seemed to be in that ominous club.

“That’s that. Then I’ll call you Yuuta after this.”

“Err…… Is calling my name directly okay?”

“Well, you’re my kouhai, so wouldn’t it be strange if I call you Yuuta-san?”

Err, it's because of that…… Don't people normally call me Segawa-kun at these times?

"That's all, nice to meet you, Yuuta."

While saying that, Raika-san turned around to look at me.

At that instant, a faint smile appeared on her originally expressionless face…… Though I wasn't really sure.

In reality, that might just be a change of expression within two centimeters. Even so……

(…… Eh? That's odd.)

At the same time, a change occurred around my heart.

Thump! Thump! Thump! It was a shock that shook me from the inside of my body. No, that was my heartbeat, it felt as though a car with an extra large bass speaker drove beside me, loudly playing a bass tune.

(W- what's with this? My heart is beating so fast……)

"Goodbye, Yuuta."

Raika-san said simply and left.

I could only stare blankly at her silhouette.

"W- wait a minute, what's with this? Why is my chest so painful……"

Is this some kind of illness?

No, this is not an illness.

Though I didn't have an experience like that, even I understand that this type of uncontrollably vigorous heartbeat indicates only one thing.

"Maybe, perhaps…… This…… This is……."

And then I didn't even remember what place I went to after that, I only know that when I came back to my senses, I was standing at the entrance of my home, while the silhouette of Nimura wearing an apron was cutting vegetables in the kitchen.

"Eh? Why are you here so early? Did you take attendance for me?"

"Yeah……"

"What is it? You skipped class? That's fine, since I have to make ramen right now. It's veggie

ramen.”

“Yeah……”

I answered weakly, then sat down in front of the coffee table.

My heart was still pounding, the smile on Raika-san’s face lingered in my mind.

“I’m planning to cook some veggies and then thicken it, do you have any flour in your house? I’ll have to get some from a supermarket nearby if not.”

“Yeah……”

That moment, Nimura seemed to have noticed something was off with me, and he confusedly observed my expression.

“Oi! Segawa-chan, you’re acting rather strangely since just now.”

“Yeah……”

“Wait a sec, should you really be saying ‘yeah……’ at this time?”

Nimura took off his apron, and sat opposite me.

“What happened? I’ll say this first, I won’t believe you even if you say that you’re okay.”

“I saw that person.”

“Which person?”

“She said that she’s Oda Raika, a senpai one year older than us who’s in Humanities.”

“Oda Raika…… Oh! The one from the welcome party. No, I should say after the welcome party. Well, she is quite a rarely seen beauty.”

“Yeah…… She’s so beautiful…… Really……”

“…… Wait a minute, Segawa-chan. Aren’t you acting a bit weird?”

“Really?”

“That’s not right, you’re really acting weird! Though I could probably guess what’s going on!”

That day was the first time in my life that I fell in love.

“Oi! Segawa! Segawa-kun!!”

I walked along the meandering road, walking quickly on the road that extended to the highest point of the field.

My destination is of course the Club Building. I’m going there to see Raika-san who’s probably there as well.

“I’m telling you to wait! At least wait for me to finish!”

“…… What is it?”

I stopped and turned around, seeing that Nimura was chasing me from behind, drenched in sweat.

“Huff— huff— …… Wa- wait a minute, let me get my breath back…… Also, let me have some water as well……”

Though it was a rather steep slope, we haven’t even reached half of the slope.

Seeing Nimura so out of breath, I really wonder how much he’s lacking in exercise.

Even so, abandoning him here is really quite pitiful, so we decided to rest for awhile in front of a vending machine.

“Phew— I’m alive again……”

Nimura finally heaved a long sigh of relief after finishing his sports drink in one go while resting.

“Okay, let’s hear the reason why you’re pouring cold water on my love life.”

“Oh— that’s right, that’s right.”

He slapped his thigh as though he just remembered about it.

“I’ll just say this directly, give up on that person!”

“No. That’s all.”

“Eh!? Don’t be so impulsive! Hear me out first!”

Because of Nimura’s insistence, I had no other choice but to sit with him on the bench beside the road.

“Erm— Let me put it this way, the person called Oda Raika is too heavy of a burden for you.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Don’t be so impatient, listen to me. In any case, you’re probably interested in information about her, right?”

That’s true, the only thing I knew about Raika-san was her full name and academic year.

As I was thinking about that, Nimura fished out a notebook with a cloth cover from his pocket.

“Oda Raika, twenty, second year humanities major. She passed the entrance exams scoring first place, and seems to be quite good at sports as well. It is said that there was a record of her not letting her opponent score even one point in P.E class even though she was facing active tennis club members.”

“Wow……”

Raika-san is really amazing, just as I thought…… No, she’s much more amazing than I thought.

“Being good in both academics and sports, her features are striking as well. I’ve heard that a lot of clubs went head over heels asking for her to join them when she just entered the school, while the number of men who tried to hit on her was nothing to laugh at. Not only in the school, but even the people from other colleges at the other end of the slope came to get a glimpse of her presence.”

Though it was a rather unbelievable description, people who saw Raika-san with their own eyes wouldn’t be able to deny that.

“BUT!”

Nimura suddenly raised his voice at that moment.

“At this moment, there is not even one man who is trying to get near her! Not only men, there isn’t even a person who can be treated as a friend near her! Segawa Yuuta, what do you think after learning about a fact like that!?”

“She’s quite the introvert.”

“That’s fine, I understand now! There’s a problem with your eyes!”

“What’s wrong with that? Did I say anything wrong?”

“You didn’t say anything wrong, but you didn’t get anything right as well.”

It was like Nimura was saying something allegorical.

“Anyways…… This person called Oda Raika is an incredible oddball.”

“Oddball……?”

“If not, she wouldn’t join a strange club like the Road Observation Research Society, would she?”

Road Observation Research Society— that’s right, this name was the one I heard that night.

“Road Observation Research Society huh…… Okay, that means that I can be together with Raika-san as long as I join it!”

“Wha…… Ugh…… That’s right, but……”

“Okay, I’ll join the club immediately then. I recall that I can get the application form from the staff office.”

“Whatever you say…….”

I left Nimura hugging his head on the bench, walking to the staff office alone.

As soon as I obtained the club application form, I filled it right on the spot.

I held the form that I just finished filling in and walked to the place where Raika-san and I first met— the Club Building, and joined the Road Observation Research Society that day.

After that, three months passed in a flash—

The area of Hachiouji was in the peak of summer.

To us students, it was also the peak time of our tests before the holidays as well.

At the same time the recess bell rang, sighs that sounded like both relief and resignation rang in the classes.

“I can’t go on……”

Nimura plopped his head on the desk behind me, saying that weakly.

“I understand, thanks for your hard work.”

I took the answer sheets that were passed from the back and passed it on after stacking mine on Nimura’s.

“I say, why is English a mandatory subject when we’re majoring in Japanese? Why can’t we Japanese just study the Japanese language?”

“It’s useless even if you only want to study Japanese, as English is the most common language in the world, and you wouldn’t suffer any losses after you learn it, right?”

“I will never leave Japan!”

“Nimura, it’s okay even if you make that decision, but wasn’t the college student who hanged out with you before this a foreign student as well?”

“She came from China. And if it’s Chinese, I can still speak a little of it.”

This guy would always show incredible attention when it comes to women.

If he went out with a foreign student from England, he might really be able to speak fluent British English after half a year.

From a certain angle, you could say that he’s quite an intelligent person, but the pretext is that he didn’t mistake the direction of his effort.

Today is the last day of the mid-term exams.

After that, it’s the long-awaited school break.

We can enjoy activities like the beach, swimming, fireworks and the like in the summer break. And the summer breaks of college students are especially long. This just means that we could play all we like during this time.

Even so, that is limited to people who have a lover or lots of friends.

For poor students like me, the summer break is just a period of time when I spend more time working part-time. No, that might not be true.

“Well…… Since the exams are over, let’s go to the club.”

“It’s better if I show up once in a while.”

Nimura followed me to the Club Building, walking on the campus road that we got familiar with eventually. Three months ago, this guy joined the Road Observation Research Society with me for some reason.

But it seems that he often went to various clubs anyways, so joining the ‘Roary’ might just be a sudden interest.

We breathlessly walked on the sloped path that would often twist and turn, and arrived at the Club Building after climbing another flight of stairs famous for its higher than forty degrees slant.

As its name would suggest, this is a building full of cultural and sport clubs, while the Road Observation Research Society that we belonged to—the club commonly known as ‘Roary’ has a club room here as well.

We climbed the open stairs beside the building to the second floor, and saw an odd object at the center of the corridor.

It's hard to explain, but from my first impression, two ominous parts could be seen immediately.

Firstly, the two magazines displayed at the center of the corridor. There was a woman with unusually revealing clothes on one, and the woman was even showing an alluring smile; The other one was a manga magazine, but for some reason, a girl wearing cat ears was on the cover, a banana in her mouth, saliva dripping out from the corner of her mouth.

In other words, both of them were H books.

The two H books were placed in the center of the corridor. From the fact that the books were carefully arranged into a fan shape so that people could clearly see the title, it is certain that someone deliberately placed them here.

However, another stranger object was behind the books.

In a nutshell, that object was a huge cardboard box. Square holes that seemed to be peepholes were on the box that occupied the corridor, and it was evident that someone was hiding in it.

"What…… is that?"

Finally, Nimura asked a reasonable question.

"Pretend not to see it."

"Err, that's rather difficult……"

Although I muttered the instructions to Nimura, however……

"That should be Raika-san, right?"

After realizing that Nimura was planning to extend his hand to the box, I hurriedly caught hold of his hand.

The exposed eyes from the seams were obviously Raika-san's. Moreover, her favorite handbag was beside the cardboard box that had 'Raika' written on it. No matter how you look at it, it was as though the setting forced people to notice it. Even so, Raika-san was actually concealing herself seriously. That's the scary part.

"W- wow, fancy finding a H book over here!"

I, myself, was clear that it was lame acting.

Anyways, I pretended not to notice the cardboard box, picking up the book.

"…… Oi! Nimura! Follow my lead!"

"O- okay…… Wow! That's true~ I wonder who placed it here?"

Raika-san should be satisfied with that, right? Thinking about that, I sneaked a peek at the cardboard box.

There wasn't even a slight movement in the cardboard box.

It seems that this farce had to continue.

"Eh, okay! Let's take a look…… Wow! What's this~!"

"Let me have a look, Segawa-kun…… Uwaa! That's so shameless~"

Though his tone was rather odd, Nimura continued to act with me.

"Nimura-kun, Nimura-kun, let me see yours as well."

"Alright, lets swap~"

I passed the magazine in my hands to Nimura after taking Nimura's manga.

"Whoa! This is……"

Though the manga was for people with rather special preferences, the contents were intense, and they're of lolis. The impact was so big that it made my heartbeat accelerate the moment I flipped open the book.

Hmm…… When I think about it, the cat ears manga on the cover seems to be okay. If possible, maybe I should just sneak this away…… When I was secretly planning that, a serene ringtone that was in sharp contrast with the situation rang suddenly in the cardboard box.

The next moment, the cover of the cardboard box was opened, and Raika-san stood up.

"Okay…… Mnn…… Alright…… I got it."

After hanging up, Raika-san turned to us.

"Kaichou. He isn't going to come today."

"Oh, i- is that so……"

There was an awkward silence.

"Let's go to the clubroom."

After saying that, Raika-san walked quickly into the clubroom as though nothing happened.

A slightly musty smell was in the clubroom as nobody came to the clubroom for a week or so.

The both of us and Raika-san decided to air out the place first. Since there weren't any high-tech gizmos like air-conditioners over here, we turned on the only thing that could be said as air conditioning equipment— the fan, and the musty smell finally dispersed to an acceptable level after we placed the fan at the door to air the room out.

By the way, I'm not sure if Nimura was creating an opportunity for me or just didn't want to stay in the hot clubroom, but he went home ages ago.

In other words, only Raika-san and I are in the clubroom right now……

"Mnn, here's yours."

"Ah, oh."

As soon as I thought of the fact that we're alone, my voice cracked because of nervousness.

I sipped the canned juice senpai gave me while sneaking peeks at her.

Senpai took out her favorite small camera, and it seemed as though she was looking at her photos.

At the moment I thought about that, Raika-san slowly turned her head to me, shoving the digital camera in my face.

"Look, I took this just now."

"Pffft!"

The instant I was shocked by the porn manga was mercilessly filmed.

"W- wait a sec! That kind of photo, delete it at once!"

"No."

"Err, um…… What could you do with that kind of photo anyway?"

"…… Heh."

"Why are you showing me a meaningful smile!?"

Disregarding my uneasiness, Raika-san stuffed the digital camera into the depths of her handbag.

As you can see, Raika-san is a bit strange.

If Nimura was the person who's speaking, he would probably say: 'Being able to use 'a bit' to brush away the matter, I can only say that love is blind……'

"Then, what kind of 'experiment' did you do today?"

"Hmm— A secret."

"Again……?"

Raika-san's interest is to 'observe humans'.

And that is precisely the activities of us Road Observation Research Society, more commonly known as 'Roary'.

The club that Raika-san and Kaichou founded would set up various types of tricks to make fun of people like just now, and hide nearby to observe the victim's response. It is said that they were called to the staff office to be scolded time after time when the club was first founded because they set up their tricks at the entrance of the school.

And because of that, the men who wanted to get closer to senpai naturally decreased.

Recently, Raika-san seemed to have considered the parents, so she didn't pull pranks that were too brazen recently. Instead, her observation target focused on a few people.

Naturally, the said few people was me.

The incident that happened today was probably an experiment done because of a way of thinking that I cannot comprehend.

Three months and a few days have passed since the moment when I fell in love with Raika-san. And we would be like this every time, not having even one micrometer of progress.

"I say, do you think that playing pranks on me is fun?"

"Because I want to know you better."

"Eh……?"

"Because I want to know you better."

That left me tongue-tied.

Wanting to know me better……?

D- does that mean……

"I found out today. Yuuta is a manga-type."

“Ah?”

“Also, you like cat ears. Your fetishes were exposed.”

“Guwagh……!?”

Bam!

I couldn’t help but ram my head on the table.

What is this helpless emptiness?

“No, I’m not particularly interested in cat ears. It’s true.”

“Then…… Is this okay?”

Raika-san placed her hands on her head, treating them as cat ears.

“Uuu……!?”

“Look, look, cat ears, cat ears.”

“U, uuu…….”

How can this be…… It’s both ferocious and cute……

“Mnn, there’s a response. You definitely like cat ears.”

Though Raika-san nodded in satisfaction, it was not because of the cat ears, but because of you doing that action. That made me unable to restrain the throbbing in my chest. I should say, I can’t stand this anymooore, can I push you down? It’s cat ears after all.

“Ra- Raika-san!”

At the moment I stood up, planning to break free of the shackles of reason……

“Uwaa!”

This time, the phone that emitted a piercing ringtone was mine.

Seriously, now of all times…… While complaining in my heart, I held the phone, seeing ‘Sis’ displayed on the screen.

“Hello? Is it sis? Why are you suddenly calli—“

‘Come to the bus stop!’

“Huh……?”

Tama Literary College, where I study at, is rather far from the bus stop.

Students who go to school by train have to take a bus after that as well. In any case, it isn’t a distance that people would choose to walk back and forth from.

Some students would ride to the bus stop, parking their bikes at the bicycle parking lot in front of the bus stop, and there were some wealthier ones who drove to school as well.

Because of that, people could only use the bus if they want to visit my apartment that’s five minutes away on foot from the college, if they didn’t prepare a bike or a car.

After Raika-san and I left the clubroom, we walked to the south entrance along the sloped path.

The bus stop could immediately be seen after we exit the school entrance, while sis was wiping away her sweat with a lot of bags by her leg.

“Yuuta—!”

Sis noticed me very quickly, and straightened her arm to wave at me.

Not only did sis have good-looking features that are completely different from me, with a mature dress along with a bonnet on her body that didn’t look remotely as if she gave birth to a child, making her look extremely striking. That made me the focus of the people passing by as well.

It’s so embarrassing……

“Well, I’m off then.”

“Ah……”

After saying that, Raika-senpai walked away naturally.

Seeing as we wouldn’t have many chances to meet in the holidays, this kind of farewell is much too dull. Wait, I should ask senpai out during the holidays instead, just us…… Me having the guts to ask her out or not is another matter.

“Hey! Yuuta, Yuuta!”

“Ah…… Onee-san.”

“Really, don’t just space out there, quick, help me carry them!”

“Oh, okay……”

After I finished staring reluctantly at Raika-san's leaving silhouette, I carried onee-san's luggage home.

"Heh heh, it's been quite a while!"

Onee-san hooked her arm on mine.

Maybe because I was misunderstood that I was going out with two beauties, the unpleasant gazes of the people passing by were quite upsetting.

— Actually I'm not that lucky. I feel regretful because of that as well.

However, thinking of the fact that I'm able to hang out with onee-san alone like this after such a long time, it made a hint of warmth rise in my heart as well.

"Phew—! We're finally here—!"

As soon as we entered the room, onee-san lay sprawled on the floor.

"Wait a minute, what's with this? Why is there so much stuff!"

"Those are all prepared for you, of course."

Most of the things in the bags were food, and then there were towels, socks, underwear and the likes.

"Why did you bring these things here? I can just buy them myself."

"Though you're saying that, guys deal with these matters quite hastily."

She opened my wardrobe without permission after saying that, placing my undergarments in it.

"Ah— seriously, your clothes are in a mess. You should really keep them tidier."

"Uuu…… Sorry."

That made me think of the times we stayed together in the past.

"Onee-san, why are you here this time?"

"Of course, I'm here to check out your situation. Seriously, this is all because you almost never contact me."

"That's because I'm too busy. Going to classes, working part time and so on……"

While giving these excuses, I gazed at my sister who was refolding my clothes, her nostalgic

silhouette.

My parents died in an accident when I was still in primary school, and we had lived supporting each other ever since.

We didn't have any relatives that we could rely on, and onee-san was still a high school student at that time. Her teacher seemed to have suggested that I was sent to a youth center, but onee-san stubbornly refused the suggestion.

Just like that, we came all this way with the assets our parents left us and the wages of onee-san's part-time job.

And I even relied on onee-san's support and a student loan until I went to college.

Because of that, I don't want to give her any more trouble.

Onee-san can probably live a rather happy life after marrying and having kids.

I don't want her to take care of a burden like me anymore— thinking like that should be normal, right?

"Yuuta, what are your plans during the holidays?"

"Working."

"I don't mean that. I'm asking you if you're coming back."

"Isn't that your home? It can't be considered my home……"

"Seriously, I have said this many times already. My home is your home."

Onee-san turned around and said in a somewhat angry tone.

"…… Got it. I'll stay there during the summer break."

I could only choose to accept it after she said that.

"Ah, really? That's great. Then, then…… Just for half a day, can you please help to look after my kids?"

"……Huh?"

It seemed that onee-san just told me something completely unexpected.

"Actually— During the Obon break, I must go out with Shingo-san no matter what. But leaving the three kids at home is really worrying. You can say that Shingo-san is rather overprotective in this aspect, what a silly dad……"

That's right, onee-san is actually this kind of person…..

Not only is she good at taking care of people, she's good at bossing people around as well.

She would always take advantage of me whenever I go there actively.

"It's great that you agreed so readily. Ah, you don't need to do much, as Sora and Miu can take care of Hina themselves."

Sora and Miu…… Ah, that's right. They're the daughters from my brother-in-law's side. Including the time when sis had her wedding ceremony, I had only seen them twice, so I barely remember their faces.

"I'll make this clear first, you can't touch them no matter how cute they are."

"Who would do that! And aren't they still children? I wouldn't feel like it even if I want to."

"That's hard to say~"

Onee-san showed me a meaningful smile.

The last time that I saw her would be about two years ago. I remember that it was the time when she was giving birth to her daughter.

The eldest one was about ten that time, so she's probably in middle school right now…… Gah, what am I thinking about.

"Then again, there's actually nothing to worry about. Because you like girls older than you from before, don't you?"

"N- nonsense."

"Is it because I'm the one who raised you until you're this big…… So now you're a siscon."

"W- w- w- what are you talking about! And how can you speak things like that as a sister!"

"Oh? Isn't that the truth? Isn't the girl who was beside you just now older than you?"

"T- that person…… is a senpai from my club."

"But you like her, right?"

"Wh……!?"

H- How does she know about this?

After looking at my expression, onee-san blurted out: "I knew it."

Darn it…… Why am I unable to hide anything from her way before this?

“Ah— But did your interests change a little after going to college? Reading this kind of book……”

Before I realized it, onee-san was opening my backpack, taking out its contents.

The H manga that I borrowed in secret without Raika-san’s permission is in……

“Wait a minute!”

I hurriedly snatched the exceptionally dangerous item from onee-san’s hands.

“Oh, isn’t it fine, just let me see~”

“No! No means no!”

“Your sister is telling you to let me see, let go!”

In contrast with her appearance, onee-san who was actually quite strong kept her hold on the book. I used all my effort, but was defeated not long after that.

“You’ll have to try again ten years after this if you want to win. Alright, give me the book.”

“Noo—! Just let me off the hook about this—!”

I tried to do my last protest while being straddled by onee-san on the floor while she was pulling my ear, but at this moment—

“Segawa~ I’m going on a date later, so let me use…… your…… bathroom……”

After pushing the door open boldly, Nimura froze after seeing the scene in the room.

“Err, how should I say this…… It seems…… like I’m bothering you…… Sorry!”

“What’s with that reaction!? Oi! Stop right there!”

Ignoring my protests, Nimura ran out of the room looking as though he was forcefully holding back tears.

From that time, two weeks passed in a flash, and the day onee-san and I agreed upon arrived.

That day was also the day I have to go to onee-san’s house, like some sort of ritual.

By the way, up till now, I used up my summer break on working and video games.

In the summer break, though I would occasionally meet Raika-san at Roary, in the situation where no activities were held, we had absolutely no progress in a certain aspect, while Nimura would say that I'm a wimp with a frequency of once every two days.

Disregarding that for the moment, I'm now having a bitter battle with the roads in this crucifying summer heat.

"Err…… It should be here, right……?"

With my foggy memory, I walked on the small road of the residential street.

This is the Ikebukuro of the Toshima district, though the JR Ikebukuro station is crowded like the city, the landscape would undergo a huge change with just a small distance, entering the old residential streets.

"To be honest…… It's quite hot……"

Though it was obviously still morning, puffs of heat were already emitting from the asphalt road beneath my feet.

I raised my head and looked at the dazzling sun that was as if it was emphasizing the fact that it was summer, and suddenly I had a feeling as if someone pulled a prank on me.

It seems like the 'hottest time this year' that the weather forecast predicted before this is really true.

And I had to come to a city district on a day like this from a run down place like Hachiouji……

"Oh! Found it!"

After climbing a small slope, a beautiful villa that looked as though it could appear in a TV show appeared before my eyes.

"But….. This house is really too big no matter how you look at it."

My brother-in-law's surname is 'Takanashi'. They're a family that lived here from long ago, and seemed to have been a major landlord before the war.

According to onee-san, it isn't that exaggerated right now, their land had been equally distributed among the family members, so the only asset that they owned right now is just this building.

I breathed in deeply, and a cute voice came from the intercom after I pressed the electric doorbell.

'Hello, may I ask who are you?'

“Ah…… I’m Segawa, Segawa Yuuta. Err…… I’m the younger brother of your new mom……”

‘Oh! Okay, I’ll open the door right away.’

Phew…… That’s fortunate. I was thinking what I should do if she said ‘I don’t know a person like you’.

After some time, I heard footsteps of someone coming closer to the door.

“Sorry for the wait!”

The person who opened the door for me was a young twin-tailed beauty whose looks are similar to that of an idol—

“Wow! It’s been a while! Do you still remember me?”

“Ah, err…… Well……”

My bad habit was exposed immediately. Whenever I see a cute girl, my mouth just wouldn’t function properly no matter what. Then again, with the blonde hair on her delicate face and her fair, slender limbs…… This girl looked as beautiful as a doll.

“You probably don’t remember, right? Since it’s…… once, twice…… twice from the last time we met, and two years have passed. Look, aren’t I a lot taller than before?”

The girl before my eyes said all of that in one go.

I couldn’t even find the time to answer her.

“Ah, sorry! Because I’m too happy, so that’s why I said too much. Isn’t it hot out there? Hurry up and get in!”

“O- okay……”

In the end, I didn’t even ask for her name. Err…… Which one was the blonde one……?

From her appearance, she’s probably a middle schooler……? Does that mean she’s the eldest girl, Sora-chan?

I was led by the girl to the living room without an answer.

“Please wait here for a while, I’ll call them out here.”

And she left after saying that.

In the spacious living room which was a part dining room, there was a large liquid plasma television, and there were also a set of sofas surrounding the television. I remember that there

probably wasn't such a large television here the last time I was here. Perhaps they just changed it recently. The air conditioning was going strong as well, the sweat on my body starting to turn cold.

Just at that moment, I noticed a toy box with children's toys in it beside the television.

"Hmm……"

I took out a toy that looked like a notebook computer. Keys were arranged neatly on the toy. When I typed randomly on it, the voice of a female spoke the letters that I pressed.

"Uwaa!"

I was somewhat surprised.

It seems that this is a toy for children to learn English while they are still small.

Doesn't onee-san seem rather enthusiastic about their education? Wait, doesn't this seem more like something that her husband would choose?

Actually, the toys that they make these days are quite exquisite no matter what it is.

"Oi-tan, who awwe you?"

"Uwaa!?"

A mysterious girl suddenly appeared behind me. No, it should be a young girl.

The girl stared at my face with her fingers in her mouth.

Though it was her first birthday when I last saw her, but…… Oh, I see. Her features have a hint of onee-san's looks when she's three now.

"Thwat's…… Hina's……"

It seemed like she noticed the toy in my hands, and she immediately pouted, looking as though she's going to cry at any moment.

"Ah, err, this is……"

This is bad! She'll cry if things continue!

Noticing that things are bad, I hurriedly took out a plastic trumpet from the toy box……

Toot toot toot toot toot—♪

'Huh!?"

On the next instant, the eyes of the youth brightened.

It seems that my tactic worked.

“Gweat! Oi-tan is so kwool!”

“Okay, okay. It’s fine if you’re happy.”

“Do id again! Again!”

“Oh, okay.”

Toot toot toot~ ♪

“Ahahahahaha! Gweat, gweat!”

How should I say this…… I didn’t think this would work so well.

Even I, myself, didn’t think that the youth would like it so much.

Is this some kind of a talent?

“Let me twy!”

The youth snatched the trumpet from my hands, and breathed in deeply……

Squeak~ ♪

“Uuu…… Again!”

Squeak squeak~ Squeak~ ♪

She could only make a rather hilarious noise.

“Uuu! Why can’t I do it~”

It seems that she wasn’t satisfied with the noise that she made, and she kept muttering ‘Wrong, wrong!’ while shaking her head after trying for a few times, expressing her displeasure.

Though she was just a toddler, she was quite ambitious. If she joins a band in the future, she’s probably the type of person who would argue with her teammates because of a reason like different music sense, choosing to leave the band in the end.

“How can I make it like Oi-tan—?”

“Even if you ask me that, I…… Eh? Wait a minute. By ‘Oi-tan’, are you referring to me?”

“Yeah, because Oi-tan is Oi-tan.”

What a philosophical answer, I’m completely clueless.

“At least you should call me onii-chan? You know, I’m not even twenty.”

“But Oi-tan is Oi-tan~”

The kid kept jabbing at my face with her index finger while speaking too. Oi! Not the eyes! Not the eyes!

“Whatever, I’ll talk to your guardian about the matter of names. Do you want to know how to play the trumpet?”

“Yeah! Teach me!”

Omitting the honorifics and even ordering me around so quickly? Toddlers are so inexplicable.

“Okay…… If you have the capability to learn it, then I’ll teach you. However, training is really tough, can you stand it?”

“Uuu—! I cwan!”

Toddlers are so easy to trick, she became so worked up after just a while.

Very well, I’ll play with her for now. Though there’s only half a day for me to hang out with her, I still have to build a smooth relationship. Besides, having the toddler who looks like a mini-sized onee-san feels like a win to me.

“Very well, very well. Okay, the first question. Where’s the washroom?”

“Washwoom~?”

“Err…… I have to wash my face, because you kept jabbing my face with your drool-stained finger just now. And I want to wipe away my sweat as well.”

“You can wash your face over thwere—“

“Oh! Thanks.”

After patting my niece’s head, I left the living room and walked towards the direction that she pointed in after asking her to wait for me here.

Okay, in deeper thought, I made a fatal mistake here.

Because I started getting used to living alone, instead of saying that I’m less guarded, you could say that my thoughts are getting careless as well.

Anyways, at this moment, I unhesitatingly, and without harboring evil thoughts, pulled the bathroom door open.

The possibility that someone else might be inside did not cross my mind at all.

“Eh……?”

At the same time I opened the bathroom door, I saw a girl.

The girl was about fourteen or fifteen. Though she has facial features that all ten people would say that it’s cute if you asked them, the face that looks somewhat childish to be considered a woman, and the distribution of her muscles……. Anyways, the size of her bust is still in the growth phase.

If someone asked me why I know that in such detail, that was because the girl had already taken off her coat, and was about to take off her skirt.

“Who…… are you?”

The girl asked me in a trembling voice.

“Err, ah…… I guess…… You could say…… I’m your relative…… huh?”

“I- is that so? Then, you’re Yuri-san’s……”

“Yeah! That’s right! I’m her younger brother.”

“Ahahahaha!”

“Hahahaha!”

Both of us laughed awkwardly.

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“Uwaaaaaaa! Sorry, sorry, sorryyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

Though I hurriedly closed the door, unquestionably, I had made an irreparable mistake.

“Err…… Let me introduce myself, I’m your uncle, Segawa Yuuta.”

The three sisters sat together on a sofa opposite to me, separated by a table.

“Then we should introduce ourselves as well, onee-chan.”

“…… Hmph!”

The girl that I bumped into in the bathroom just now— the eldest daughter Sora-chan, turned her face to the side, refusing to look at me.

“Onee-chan, really…… That’s just an accident, does it help if you’re angry with Oji-san?”

The second daughter tried to say to her displeased sister.

It probably because of the sharp contrast of their initial impression on me, compared with her cool sister, the second daughter Miu-chan is quite a friendly kid.

The demeanor that she displayed is so mature that it’s hard to imagine that she’s just a ten-year-old girl.

After all, even an unshakeable siscon like me (Though it’s rather shallow saying that about myself) wavered, it means that Miu-chan’s demeanor is indeed unusual.

“Sorry for that, onee-chan is a bit of a cold person.”

“Miu! Don’t tell unnecessary things!”

After being told off by her sister, Miu-chan mischievously stuck out her tongue slightly at me. Each and every tiny movement of this girl is really cute.

“The last time that we met was probably the time when Hina was one, right? That means we didn’t meet for two years now.”

“Yeah, that’s right…… It’s that long now.”

“Oji-san, do you still remember our faces?”

“M- more or less……”

“Ah! Oji-san, you’ve just told a lie, right—!”

Uuu….. She’s sharp.

“Not really…… Well, I couldn’t recognize you two for a moment since both of you became so pretty now.”

“Ah~ Really~ You won’t get anything even if you flatter us like this~”

Though I gave an answer that I thought was quite good, the only person who had a response was Miu-chan.

The eldest daughter still looked as grumpy as just now, glaring at me as though she was saying: “Stop that flattery!” Well, that’s okay, since my ability to deal with females is just at this level…… Sigh!

“Oi-tan, what about Hina? What about Hina—?”

“Yeah! Hina is cuter as well.”

“Ehehehe—♪”

Seeing my niece come over to me happily, I patted her head gently.

“That’s right, where’s onee……. Where’s your mother and the others? I don’t seem to see them anywhere……”

Onee-san asked me to come over earlier. That’s why I came here in the morning though I felt that it was still rather early.

“Otou-san and Yuri-san went out ages ago.”

“Eh!? Really!?”

Went out ages ago……. What time did they go out…….?

Actually, what are they going out for that they must leave their three kids at home?

“That’s a headache. Though I came here already, I don’t really know what to do.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. You just need to stay in the house.”

“Huh…… Is that so?”

“That’s right!”

According to Miu-chan, since this is a city district, there would always be promoters and strange people visiting.

And because of that, their father could not let his daughters stay at home like that.

Their father only became slightly relieved when I, who could be considered as an adult, stayed here. That’s how things are.

“Oji-san, just treat yourself as a guest and rest here. Ah, that’s right. Are you hungry yet? Though it’s a bit early, I can help you to make lunch.”

Just like that, it seems like Miu-chan made the lunch herself.

Obedient, thoughtful, and really cute…… No wonder her father would worry.

Thinking about this, it’s okay even if I’m treated as a watchdog.

However, does that mean I have to space out in the building before onee-san comes home?”

Asking me to stay in this unfamiliar place alone…… It feels like moving to a place other than the living room is rather dangerous.

“Having nothing to do is really quite a bore……”

As I was thinking of how to pass the time, leaning my back on the sofa, I coincidentally met the eldest daughter Sora-chan’s gaze.

“…… Hmph!”

She’s still like that…… Well, that can’t be helped, barging in when a girl is changing her clothes is indeed my fault.

But I’ve apologized a lot of times already, and it’s really an accident…… Forget it, anyway, I’ll

just have to take care not to let her hate me more.

“Oi-tan! Oi-tan!”

“Guwaagh!?”

As I was thinking about this, I was suddenly ambushed from behind.

Someone grabbed my head from behind the sofa, and my head was turned mercilessly.

“Hi- Hina…… This action is rather dangerous, you can’t do this next time.”

“Hmm— …… Got it!”

Though that response was rather doubtful, but seeing my cute niece’s smile, I’ll just forget about this.

“Then what do you want to play?”

“Play that, that…… Video game!”

“Oh…… A video game huh. What kind of game do you want to play?”

Hina took out a rectangular controller from the drawers in the television wardrobe.

I know this too, it’s a machine controlled by waving at the screen.

Because of Nimura, I got to know more about video games recently, so I have a bit interest in these kinds of things.

“Alright. But I’ll say this first, I won’t go easy on you even if you’re three.”

After making that declaration that’s childish to the max, I took the controller.

We immediately started playing. It looks as though it’s a game where you wave a controller that looks like a snack bar to fence.

“Hey! Ah—!”

“Uwaa! W- wait a sec! That’s too despicable!”

She struck first. It seems that she wants to attack while I’m not too familiar with the controls yet.

Kids like this like to play tricks like this.

However……!

I have to say, my opponent is a three-year-old kid!

Even if she uses dirty tactics like this, it's nothing when compared to an adult's despicable wisdom.

"Take that, and that, and that!"

After playing for awhile, I understood the properties of the remote and didn't need to wave it so vigorously, and using my wrists' movement to wave it could execute faster attacks.

After I noticed that technique, the kid who only knows how to wave it around isn't my match now. The tables were turned in an instant, and the contest leaned towards my one-sided advantage.

"Take that! Aha!"

"Ahh—!"

In the end, I easily won.

"Guwahahaha! Train for ten more years if you want to win against me!"

"Uuu~ I lost~!"

Seeing me show off my victory like this, Hina pouted, looking rather displeased.

Just like that, my niece probably learnt how merciless society is, right?

"……. Bullying a kid so seriously even though you're an adult."

Sora-chan who was a spectator said disdainfully.

"No….. It's just…… Ugh, I'm thinking that it's impolite if I go easy on her if she's a kid, so that's why……"

Sora-chan glared at me with a 'Such excuses, how shameful' expression.

Hina who just lost to me ran to Sora-chan's side while weeping.

"Sora nee-taaaaaaan~!"

"Okay, okay, don't cry. Oji-san is so childish~"

…… It seems that I went too far.

After glaring at me, Sora-chan grabbed the controller that Hina was waving before.

“Onee-chan will get revenge for Hina.”

“Uuu….. A- are we going to play?”

Feeling an abnormally imposing aura from her, I grabbed the controller as well.

“Hah—!”

Sora-chan immediately rushed over when the game started.

“Uwa! Which technique is this!?”

Sora-chan cleverly used her controller, attacking furiously.

This kid…… Is a master!?

“Blast! It wouldn’t be so easy!”

It’s just a video game. But it just felt like my pride as a man would be scratched if I were to lose to a middle school girl. If I lost, Nimura as my video games master would probably make fun of me as well.

Just like that, I childishly used my whole strength against Sora-chan.

However……

“Heh!”

“Uwaa!?”

After cleverly taking advantage of my weak point, Sora-chan won against me in a flash.

“Phew…… I got revenge for you, Hina.”

“Uwaa~ Sora nee-tan is so gweat!”

Sora-chan coolly wiped away the sweat on her face, while Hina tightly hugged her leg, using her whole body to express her joy.

As for me, I looked as though I lacked oxygen, falling onto the floor on my two palms. It seemed that I’ve put in too much effort. This game is unexpectedly exhausting…… Compared to me, kids are really so energetic.

“Though you’re an adult…… So weak.”

“So weak~”

Uuu…… It's even more regretful that I have nothing to say in my defense.

Thus, I decided to admit defeat obediently, handing the controller to Hina.

In the end, Sora-chan took my place as Hina's opponent as I was too tired to continue, while lunch seemed to have been done during this time, as Miu-chan called us to the dining table wearing an apron.

The lunch menu is plain noodles and curry. Looking at the pure white noodles filled in the large glass container, it made the summer heat dissipate at once. And the curry is my favorite sweet and spicy flavor as well. Onee-san probably made that for me beforehand.

When we were eating, Miu-chan chatted amiably with me, but the eldest daughter still seemed to be angry, and it doesn't feel like she wanted to establish a friendship with me at all.

That's odd. Don't people say that a friendship would be born after two opponents battled with all their might or something like that?

Though it's just a video game.

"The pink one! All Hina's!"

"Okay, okay, got it. Don't hurry when you're eating."

For her sister who immediately asked for the special pink noodles, Sora-chan separated them carefully.

Actually, she's basically quite a nice child…… And she's good at taking care of people too.

"Oji-san is a college student right now, right? What kind of place is your college?"

"How should I say this…… Anyways, it's easier than middle school and high school. There's not much homework, and the breaks are quite long."

Miu-chan was rather interested in college life, and asked a lot of questions about it. I can understand her feelings, as I really thought that college students have it easy when I was in high school as well.

"Then did you get a girlfriend after getting into college?"

"Errr…… W- Why are you asking this all of a sudden……"

"Don't college students have a lot of chances to meet friends in clubs, parties and so on? And you're handsome after all, so I'm just wondering if you already have a girlfriend."

Handsome? Me?

Though I usually wouldn't mind polite words like these, it really felt quite good coming from Miu-chan.

"Err…… Not really……"

"But you have a person that you like, right?"

"Eh!? W- Why would you say that!?"

"Ah— you have one, indeed. What kind of person is she? Is she the beautiful type? Or the cute type? Ah, but Oji-san feels somewhat like a siscon, so she's probably an onee-san type, right?"

Miu-chan said all that in a rapid fire tone.

Then again, why did onee-san and this kid say that I'm a siscon so quickly?

"Then what kind of person is she?"

"N- no, how should I say this……"

"What does it matter~ Why don't you tell your cute niece~"

Miu-chan approached me, looking up at me with a slightly coquettish expression.

Her actions and expression really didn't seem like that of a ten-year-old primary school student, and has a rather inexplicable atmosphere. Even I, who lacks experience in going out with girls, could understand that this girl is the type that people call little devils. Or perhaps you could say that she has the talent of making guys feel 'Does she like me?' or something like that……

"Miu! Stop that!"

"Eh~ What does that matter? Don't you want to know as well, onee-san?"

"I- I'm definitely not interested in that!"

"Lies~ You obviously bathed two times as soon as you heard that Oji-san was coming. But that happened before you were able to bathe for the second time……"

"Miu!"

"Whoops…… I'll go do my homework in my room!"

"Don't you move! Miu!"

Miu-chan hastily ran out of the room.

In the end, only Sora-chan with her flushed face and Hina who was rubbing her eyes looking rather sleepy after finishing her lunch, and also me, who didn't know how to respond, and could only look here and there awkwardly.

"…… It's not that."

"Eh?"

With her head lowered, Sora-chan spoke in a small voice with her face flushed.

"I was sweaty after cleaning the house…… Th- that's why I felt like taking another bath…… Th- that's all!"

"Okay, okay. I understand."

Being glared at by her like that, I really can't say anything other than 'I understand'.

After that, Sora-chan left the dining table, looking as though she's going to look for Miu-chan……

"I forgot! Hina, go to your bedroom if you want to sleep!"

"Mnn……. Uguwau……"

But she hurriedly walked back, carrying Hina who completely lost to her sleepiness but was still trying to stuff her noodles into her mouth, and left.

Just like that, I was left all alone in the living room.

"Sigh……"

I finally had some peace and quiet.

However, having three girls in the house is really taxing.

Thinking of onee-san who had to take care of them every day, it's really impressive.

As for me, I felt like giving up just after two hours.

"Ahh…… I'm exhausted……"

I walked to the sofa in front of the television from the dining table, and lied on the sofa.

Since I was too serious when playing video games just now and I have just finished eating, coupled with the fact that I didn't sleep much yesterday night, my eyelids drooped because of the comfortable situation.

“Whatever…… I’ll have a nap too……”

I gave in to my sleepiness, and fell asleep.

“Oji-san…… Oji-san……”

It seems that someone is calling me by my side.

“Wake up for a sec, I want to ask you to teach me how to do my homework. Oji-san~”

Uuu…… That’s too troublesome.

And you should do your homework by yourself, that’s why studying is meaningful.

“Wow! Oji-san said some rather serious things.”

Of course, I’m a serious college student after all. I never skip classes, and don’t join parties or anything. Ah, that’s not right, I was chased out of the classroom by the professor once, but that’s just once.

“Really, why is Oji-san starting to say all these mystifying things…...”

Whatever, just let me sleep for another five minutes…… I’ll finish my report when I wake up.

“Sigh…... No choice. I’ll have to do it myself.”

Dong dong dong……

“Oi-tan! O— i— tan—!”

Thump!

“Guwagh!?”

Something landed heavily on my belly.

I opened my eyes immediately and saw a toddler that looked like a mini onee-san sitting on my belly. Seeing her looking as though she used her whole body to express her happiness, though I couldn’t bear to be angry at her, it was still unexpectedly heavy, and very painful.

“Hina…… What are you doing, you almost squeezed out all my innards.”

“What’s an innard—?”

“Innards are innards. But those are somewhat bloody, and I can’t teach this to a three-year-old child because of moral issues. Those things don’t matter for now, just get off my belly for now. I still want to sleep for awhile.”

“Eh~”

I carried the toddler who puffed out her cheeks in protest aside, and closed my eyes again.

Though Hina still patted my face in protest, and even stuck her fingers into my nostrils, doing a lot of annoying things, but she got tired of me not giving any response, and left after some time.

“Sigh….. I can finally get a good rest……”

Just like that, I fell asleep again.

“…… Oi, wake up, wake up!”

Again…… Someone is calling me again.

This time, it was different from the other two who unceremoniously woke me up, the person seemed to be speaking to me in a low, troubled voice.

“Hey! Wake up for awhile….. You’ll get a cold sleeping here.”

What are you talking about? How could you get a cold so easily in this hot summer?

“That doesn’t mean you can’t get a cold in summer, the air conditioning is still going strong as well. Also, you kept trembling as if you were really cold since just now.”

Ah! That’s true. When I think about it, it really feels rather cold.

“Anyways, just wake up. Or…… I’ll feel awkward.”

What would you be awkward for……?

Whatever, I haven’t slept enough yet. I’ll just sleep until onee-san comes back.

“P- please! Don’t sleep anymore!”

Alright, sorry. Goodnight.

“Really…… I won’t care about you anymore!”

It seems that the person gave up. Rough footsteps as though the person was showing her displeasure came into my ears.

Mnn…… Let's just sleep on.

"…… Huh?"

I opened my eyes as though someone just flipped a switch.

I looked around me. The sun seemed to have set quite far, and the room was rather dark.

"Whoops…… I slept for too long.

I was originally asked to take care of the house for their guardians, if they found out that I just left them and slept, onee-chan might treat me to her iron fists.

Thinking of that, I uneasily jumped off the sofa.

At that moment, I noticed a blanket that slid down onto the floor from my body.

"This is…… Who would do this for me?"

When I look more closely, the air conditioner was redialed to a fairly weak level.

"Was it Miu-chan……?"

A just washed fragrance was on the blanket.

"…… Mnn? What's this?"

I noticed another small sock on the floor along with the blanket. From its size, it was obviously Hina's sock.

"Perhaps she used the sock to cover me because she doesn't have anything else?"

Though the fact that Hina was worried that I would get a cold made me happy, putting a sock that a person took off on someone else would just make people feel as though they were just bullied.

"Actually, where are the kids?"

It doesn't seem as though there were anyone else in the house.

I turned over and noticed a note on the table.

'We're out shopping at the supermarket. Miu'

They left me at home, and went out by themselves!?

Not to mention iron fists right now, I might be killed by onee-san as a tribute now!

I hurriedly stuffed my phone and my wallet back into my pockets and ran to the entrance.

As I was about to rush out of the door after wearing my shoes, the door opened by itself, and a familiar middle-aged man came into my eyes.

"…… Blasted kid, who are you?"

"Eh……?"

At the same time the man spoke, his eyes furiously glared at me.

"You actually deceived my daughters, coming to my house while I was out, you really have guts!"

"Ah!? Er, wait a minute, I have completely no idea about what you're saying……"

"You don't understand? Then I'll let your body remember this thoroughly! Taste the greatness of fatherly love!"

"Uwaaaaa! W- wait a sec! Are you misunderstanding something!?"

"There's no misunderstanding! Speak! Which daughter did you extend your paw to!"

"I'm telling you that you're misunderstanding something!"

The man suddenly roared in anger, rushing at me while waving a shoehorn placed at the entrance.

"You bug that approached my three cute princesses! Speak! Was it Sora!? Or was it Miu!? Who did you—"

At that moment, the man stared at something and froze.

His gaze was on my hands.

And in my hands, was Hina's sock which had just dropped onto the floor.

"M- m- maybe it's…… i- it's Hinaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"How is that possible—!"

Though I said that in reflex, it seemed that the man's anger was reaching its peak.

"I can't let you go…… I never would have guessed that you chose Hina, the youngest of them all……! A blasted pedophile like you…… I must kill you with my own hands!"

“At least hear me out!”

At the instant the man in front of me turned into Shura because of his love for his daughters, and raised the shoehorn in his hands—

“Stop that, you idiot husband!”

The person who flung the slippers at the man’s head…… was my onee-san.

“So sorry for this, my apologies, Yuuta.”

The man that could be said as my brother-in-law turned back into a friendly middle-aged person from the Shura just now. He actually feels like a rather introverted person, but the murderous aura that he gave out just now was really true.

“Really…… Shingo-san is just too impulsive.”

After onee-san saved me from being murdered by a shoehorn, we were now surrounding the dining table with dinner on it. I heard that they had originally planned to come back even later, but since my brother-in-law kept complaining tearfully: “I want to see my daughters.” they had no other choice but to come back earlier.

“Really, Papa is always like this, attacking them if men approached the house.”

“Ah, it’s really too embarrassing. Ahaha!”

Is this a matter that can be brushed past with just a laugh?

Perhaps this ossan treats all men who approach this place as an enemy because his daughters are too cute?

I wonder how many male neighbors were sacrificed because of this.

“What is it? Were you lonely just now when Papa wasn’t here?”

“Mnn. Not at all! Because Oji-san was here.”

“I- is that so…… Ha, haha…… that’s fine.”

Though he was laughing, his eyes were obviously glaring at me.

“Hina, were you a good girl today?”

“Mnn. Hina is always a good girl!”

“Oh, is that so. That’s great. Do you want to play video games with Papa?”

“Eh~ Papa is too weak, no~ I wanna play with Oi-tan!”

“Eh? Ah, mnn……”

Err— I just feel that his gaze is really crucifying at this point.

“Ah, erm…… Papa……”

“Oh! Sora. Is there anything wrong?”

“Erm…… Well…… The thing that I spoke of, did you buy it for me……?”

“Ah! That…… I recall that Mama did buy that.”

“I remembered to buy it. I’ll take it to your room later.”

“Great! Thanks a lot! Yuri-san is the best!”

Sora-chan happily hugged onee-san. Seeing her smile so happily like this after being stared at grumpily all day, it made me feel rather taken aback.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Sora, Papa put in a lot of effort too.”

“Mnn, thanks.”

That was a rather shallow thanks. The father who originally thought that he would get a hug started to have a tantrum alone at the sofa because of the blow.

“Alright, alright, Shingo-san, don’t act like that. At least I know that you worked hard.”

“Yu- Yuri-san……!”

He hugged onee-san tearfully.

Seeing a family gathering like this, it made me as an observer know onee-san’s current happiness very well.

Even if she has a husband who’s older than her by a lot, and even if she has daughters who aren’t related to her by blood, they can still become a family…...

In my eyes, it made me feel both happy and slightly lonely. At the same time, I couldn’t help but think…… Can I be like them, creating a family with someone?

The mystifying thing is, Raika-san’s face surfaced in my mind at this moment. But when I returned to reality, the one who would be waiting for me the most would only be Nimura.

…… Should I try to ask her out? At least the courage for acting out my thoughts gushed out right now.

Actually, I think I did quite well today.

“Onee-san…… Since you probably don’t need me to look after your house today…… I’m going home.”

“Yuuta. What are you talking about, you can just stay here.”

“As Yuri said, I won’t attack you anymore.”

“You don’t need to worry, Oji-san. And onee-chan tidied up a room for you yesterday as well.”

“Miu! Why do you always talk so much!”

“Ah, nothing really, it’s really not that……”

How should I say this? I really didn’t feel like leaving because I was uncomfortable or anything……

“Actually…… I thought of something that I have to do.”

“Is it something important?”

Onee-san gazed at my eyes while asking.

“Yeah.”

I answered unhesitatingly.

“Is that so. Then it can’t be helped.”

“Oi-tan, don’t go—“

Hina hugged my leg tightly while protesting.

“So sorry. I’ll come over and play with you next time. That’s right, I’ll stay the night here next time, then I’ll be able to play with Hina the whole day.”

I said while patting Hina’s head.

“Oji-san, you have to play here next time too. Here, onee-chan, say something.”

“I- I don’t need to!”

Sora-chan hastily looked away after meeting my gaze.

Seeing our interactions, a relieved smile appeared on onee-san's face.

"Yuuta, your brother-in-law and I will be going overseas for a trip for about a week next time, so I hope that you can stay here during that time. It was because I wanted to ask you about this that I tried you today like this. I'll give you payment, so remember to stay here after next week."

"E- ehhhhhhh—!?"

The shouts that echoed in the house after onee-san's unhesitating proclamation were the three sisters' shouts.

Ah, so that's how things are! That means, today is a simple rehearsal.

Seeing onee-san's happy smile that looked like a child who successfully initiated a prank, and me as her younger brother unable to protest. Besides, I feel like making up for the regret that I didn't visit for such a long time.

"…… Alright. Then I'll come over next week then."

I'll have to build a good relationship with them next time.

Just like that, I left the warm, comfortable house along with Hina's happy shouts of farewell.

I walked towards the bus stop along the streets that had turned completely dark.

This place is different from Hachiouji, stars almost couldn't be seen over here.

"So…… Brother-in-law is actually quite a nice person."

I said that naturally while walking.

"Sora-chan and Miu-chan seemed to treat onee-san as their family from the bottom of their hearts…… Compared with myself, who was jealous like a kid, I'm really too silly."

Ever since my parents passed away, the things that onee-san and I went through were mostly sad things.

Even so, onee-san continued to support ourselves up till now, and she finally found such a happy family.

I should try calling Raika-san when I go back. She should still be awake at this time.

If so, I'll try to muster the courage to ask her out on a date with me.

Thinking of that, my footsteps became lighter.

In the end, I still didn't ask senpai out.

Nimura scolded me viciously with words like 'Wimp', 'Good-for-nothing' and so on, while onee-san who found out about that was rather taken aback by my performance at the other side of the phone as well.

Onee-san finally told me:

'Never mind, just don't give up, and continue to work hard. Not giving up is your strong point after all.'

And that was the last time that I spoke to onee-san.

On the tenth day after that conversation, the plane that onee-san and her husband were on went missing.

Chapter 2 - The Three Sisters' Resolve

I no longer have any impression of what had happened in that week.

I was suddenly called to the lounge while I was working.

I was wondering what had happened when I saw my co-worker with a man in a suit in the lounge, and the man suddenly flashed me his police badge.

After that, I heard from him about the news of the plane crash.

I really wanted to treat it all as a joke, but the two people in front of me had a solemn face as they told me "Yes, it's true.", as though it didn't concern them at all.

My memory from that point onwards became very hazy.

Where was I, what was I doing, what did I eat, when did I sleep, all these that should have been in my memory normally, disappeared from my mind.

The only thing I remembered was, violently throwing the television remote when I saw the words, "Chances of Passengers' Survival Slim" on the news.

In less than a week, the remains of the plane crash were found in Africa. But then the government had one-sidedly announced to the public that all the passengers had died.

The chaos that had begun early in the morning had finally subsided, and I could finally sit on the sofa and catch my breath.

The funeral service today was just too plain.

Even though it couldn't be helped that their remains couldn't be located, but it was just too hard to accept since it was the funeral of my one and only kin.

I couldn't even cry.

This was to be expected.

To suddenly hear that the plane that your sister was on had crashed, the plane had been smashed into multiple pieces so your sister should be dead——

There had to be something wrong with you if you could accept it calmly after being told such a

cruel truth.

And yet my brother-in-law's relatives had mostly accepted the news, and were crying non-stop at the funeral.

“I missed my chance……”

The words unconsciously slipped from my mouth.

Of course, this incident was a great shock to me, but such an accident just couldn’t make me feel a sense of realism.

Now that I could finally accept it a little, but the people around me who were crying had slowly started to regain their composure, so now I couldn’t cry even if I wanted to.

“Yuuta.”

“Ah… Aunt…”

The diminutive and dignified middle-aged woman who spoke to me was my late father’s elder sister, and she is almost my one and only relative now. I stood up and thanked her for being able to attend Sis’ funeral.

To be honest, I was never good at getting along with her.

My impression of her was that she was very strict, and she had said some harsh words to my sister in the past.

Even so, it was a great consolation to see a senior you’ve known since young.

“I should be leaving soon, what do you plan to do, Yuuta?”

“Me too, I’ll be leaving in a while.”

Not long ago, everyone was still gathered in that warmth filled living room eating dinner, but now things had changed completely. I believe it’d make my brother-in-law’s relatives feel uncomfortable if I had continued to stay.

Just as I thought that,

I heard these words.

“Sora-chan, have you thought about who you want to live with?”

Even though it was a gentle voice, it was also a troubled voice.

There was a trace of worry in the middle-aged man’s voice.

“I already have a teenage son, so it’ll be a little difficult. I can still consider if it’s just Hina, so Sora-chan, how about transferring to a boarding school?”

“Your uncle in Kouchi also said that he’s willing to adopt one of you. It’s a good place over there; the air is fresh as well.”

.....So they’re deciding where Sora-chan and the others will stay from now on.

“If I recall, Miu-chan’s birth mother never got remarried after getting divorced from your father. Can anybody contact her? Does Miu-chan know how to contact her?”

“……I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

Miu-chan must be crying now. Her voice was shaking as she replied.

I unconsciously grit my teeth.

Just then, a strong voice was heard in the room.

“Th-That…”

It was Sora-chan.

“We…. We want the three of us to stay together.”

I didn’t have to look in order to know what kind of expression Sora-chan had as she said something like that in front of the adults.

Aunt, who was with me, had a sombre expression as well.

“You’re right. But… it’s not a simple task for an ordinary family to bring up three children at once. Even though we understand as well that it’s cruel, but this is the only step we can take.”

What they’re saying is understandable. Even though the new on television had been constantly reporting about the problems of fewer kids, but if you consider the time and money spent to

raise a child, it would be an extremely difficult task to bring up three children in a city like Tokyo. Not to mention that the children weren't even of your own flesh and blood.

"I'm sorry, Sora-chan… it's impossible."

I heard another unknown voice.

However, Sora-chan didn't answer.

I couldn't take it anymore and walked to the living room's entrance.

There, the adults in black who had just returned from the funeral were gathered around. In their midst were the three isolated sisters clinging tightly together. Hina was sleeping quietly in Sora-chan's arms, while Miu-chan, who was sobbing, was hugged by Sora-chan as she stood her ground against the adults.

"Yuuta, you can't disturb them. That family has their own issues to consider."

Aunt placed her hand on my back, as though worried.

Just then, someone who looked like Shingo-san's brother said.

"In any case… we also don't wish to send members of the Takanashi family to live in a welfare facility. Sora-chan, please understand this. Even if everyone is separated, you are all still living in the same country. You'll definitely meet one another again, right?"

This… isn't this impossible?

Even though it seemed like a kind way of putting it, but in reality, doesn't it actually mean "if you don't listen, we'll chase you out of the house"?

Sora-chan, who was biting her lips tightly, and Miu-chan, who was sticking closely to her sister's back. Finally, in Sora-chan's arms and was being protected by the two girls – Hina, who was a miniature version of Yuri-neesan.

It was as though a string had snapped in my heart.

"Do you want to come to my place?"

Even I was shocked by my own words.

In the living room, everyone's line of vision gathered on me in an instant.

"Onii-……"

In that split second, my eyes met Sora-chan's widened eyes.

I also realized at that moment that my decision was correct.

"Even though I'm poor, the room's small, and I don't have anything at all. But it's okay even if it's all three of you."

Droplets of tears started falling from Sora-chan's eyes.

"Oji-san——!"

Pulling her sister's hand that was carrying their younger sister, Miu-chan came running over from the living room, and hugged me without any hesitation.

And I was just like Sora-chan earlier, hiding the three sisters behind my back as I stared at the adults in front of me.

"Who… are you?"

The man who looked like a civil servant stared at me fiercely as a vein twitched in his temple. Well, this can't be helped.

I took a deep breath, as I could not let myself back down here.

Aunt let out a deep sigh as she looked at me with her head in her hands.

Maybe only Aunt could fully understand what kind of chaos would ensue from now onwards. But at that moment, it was all I could manage, trying to protect the three sisters.

The next day, I took the three of them and returned home first thing in the morning.

Well, it'd be more appropriate to say that I snatched them by force.

The heated arguments had gone on throughout the night, so I secretly packed my things, and took the three girls out of the Takanashi residence.

I felt extremely guilty for leaving Aunt there and leaving Tokyo without a word, but I also clearly understood that I could not just leave Sora-chan and the others in that kind of environment.

We got off at Hachiouji and slowly walked down the road to the apartments before finally reaching the doorstep to my house.

At least the three sisters were excited, as though going on a camping trip, as they came into contact with such a natural environment.

After emphasizing once more how small my place was, the three of them finally took their first memorable step into the hallway.

“Here, just come in.”

“Wah——♪”

Hina ran into the room as though she couldn’t wait.

“Eh~ it’s cleaner than I expected——”

She was closely followed by Miu-chan, who evaluated the room as she stepped in.

“S-Sorry to intrude……”

Last was Sora-chan, who entered in a timid manner.

As I thought, it was a little cramped to have four people squeezing in such a small room.

“Ah, there’s a porn mag.”

“Buwaghh!? W-Wait a minute!”

Don’t tell me I forgot to hide it after reading it?!

“Ahaha, I was lying——”

“Don’t scare me like that……”

It’s been a week since I stayed at home, so the first thing to do was to open the windows for ventilation. Next would be to arrange my textbooks and other stuff to make room – though it doesn’t really make much difference.

But, I didn’t feel any regret at all.

The real mistake would be in allowing these children to be separated from each other by being sent to welfare societies or different families.

“This is, Oi-tan’s home?”

“Ahh, yeah. And from today onwards, this will be Hina’s home as well.”

“Hina’s? But Hina’s house, has always been there——”

As I thought, it’s too difficult for a three-year-old to understand the situation.

At this moment, Sora-chan looked at her sister's eyes and said.

"Hina, listen to me. We can no longer go back to that home."

"Why—?"

"There's no why. It might be too difficult for Hina, so I won't explain. But in any case, this will be our new home!"

"Nn, okay!"

Hina smiled vibrantly.

"Nn, question!"

"Um, go ahead, Miu-kun."

"Where should we change?"

"……"

Crap, I didn't consider that at all.

"You didn't consider that at all."

"Ugh..... n-no, there's no such thing."

I hurriedly explained to Sora-chan, who had seen through my thoughts, as my brain was thinking of a solution.

"Right, when you change I'll go to the kitchen and wait. Even though the door there is always open, but when the time comes it should be no problem if I close the door."

Even though it was a pretty superficial solution, but it was the only one I could think of at this point.

As I thought, I had no choice but to change homes……

Should I look for another apartment while I still had some money on hand?

Even though this apartment is close to the university, but it's quite a distance from the station, and it might even bring some living inconveniences.....

Wait, then what about school!

Setting myself aside, how will the three of them commute to school while they're living here!

Crap, I completely didn't consider this at all.....

It's highly possible that this might become an unexpectedly difficult life.

"Hey, listen."

"Eh? Me?"

You just can't tell who she's calling when she's always saying "Hey" or "That".

She's just being too polite considering we'll be living together as a family.

"Speaking of which, can we change the way of addressing me?"

"Won't 'Oji-san' do?"

"Not exactly, rather than say it won't do…… well, see, I'm still just a university student, so to be called 'Oji-san' by others, it feels a little…"

"Then, Oji-sama!"

"No! It just feels completely wrong hearing that so it's a definite no!"

"Eh~"

Like hell there won't be any misunderstandings if other people heard that.

Don't tell me, Miu-chan knew that and did it on purpose?

"Well, we can settle that issue next time."

Rather than the way of addressing, there's a mountain of issues that are more pressing at hand.

There's housing problems, school problems, financial problems, and… the problem with the relatives.

I don't think it'll just be a happy ending since I secretly ran away with the three of them as though we were running from a disaster.

Running isn't a solution either, so we'll probably have to face them again in the near future.

But it's a real hassle to handle these people. I'm sure Sis received a lot of criticism as well when she married into the Takanashi family. There would occasionally be a lack of delicacy because of the lack of distance, since they're relatives. Sora-chan and Miu-chan were also probably the topic of gossip because of their mothers' situation.

…Yes. As I thought, I have to protect these children properly in Sis' stead.

"Hey, Oi-tan. Hina's hungry—"

"Oh, that's right. We didn't really eat much since last night."

Let's get lunch first, even though it's a little early.

"We'll go out for lunch at noon. We'll discuss what happens from now on after eating."

Lunch was settled at a nearby Chinese restaurant.

Even though the restaurant looked old-fashioned in terms of trend and was small, the place was very popular for an eatery beside the school, due to the fact that the food was cheap and the portions were quite big. Even though this place was relatively empty due to school vacation, normally this place would be filled with all sorts of muscled men that were into different kinds of physical activities.

For three beautiful teenage girls – one of them would be more appropriate to be called a beautiful young girl – to be sitting in a place normally filled with the stench of sweat, was an extremely rare case. The manager, who was known to be a man of a few words, seemed to be very happy as he delivered one dish to our table.

We had quite a lot of leftover food even though we didn't order that much.

"It's quite delicious— the shop uncle was quite friendly too, it's a really good place. It's actually my first time coming to such a place to eat."

"I-is that so."

Even though normally the uncle was just about as talkative as the statue on campus, it would seem that having beautiful girls appear in his shop has made his inner heart a little more vibrant with colour…

"Hina, Hina thinks, the prawns are delicious!"

"Is that so~ uncle, you must give us a discount on account of how cute Hina is~"

"Ehehe—"

As Hina ate her fried rice in big mouthfuls with her tiny mouth until it was all over her face, the uncle and I smiled.

Just watching a child eat so happily was enough to infect people with happiness. This was something that I experienced for the first time. Though, I certainly didn't expect that having to

clean up after such a messy eater would be so troublesome.

“Onee-chan, what’s wrong? Was the food not delicious to you?”

Worried about her sister who had not spoken a single word, Miu-chan asked Sora-chan.

Speaking of which, she didn’t speak much either while we were eating.

“Don’t tell me, you didn’t like the environment of the shop? Well, true… it does feel a little dirty. Sorry about that, I’ll bring you girls to another place next time……”

“It’s not like that! What I wanted to say was… that is… it’s about the money.”

Sora-chan stared at my face as she asked.

“Earlier, I saw your wallet when you were paying for the bill. You don’t have much savings left either, right?”

“That’s.....”

It’s just as Sora-chan said.

The cost of two set meals and a portion of fried rice would be two thousand yen, which is quite a sum for a meal.

Even though the prices aren’t exactly that high, but I’d surely be in the red soon if we were to eat there every single day.

“Things are just a little tight now because I haven’t received my pay from work yet. Don’t worry about it.”

“But.....”

“Listen, we’re family, so standing on ceremony is prohibited.”

“Family.....?”

“It’s natural, isn’t it? We’re all living together after all.”

“Family..... Family..... Mnn.”

Sora-chan momentarily had a perplexed expression… but then her face immediately brightened up, and she kept repeating the word ‘family’ quietly, which was kind of embarrassing.

“Well, with that said, such extravagance is only occasional. We’ll still have to buy groceries and eat at home. Sis also always used to say ‘cabbage is a wallet’s best friend’ in the past.”

Even though it's not to the extent that I'm penniless, saving up is also a must.

I can't imagine how much money I will have to spend in the future and for what reasons, because I'll have to shoulder the responsibility of raising these three girls in the future……

"Next…… let's get some ice cream at the convenience store on the way back—"

"Okay~ I want choco-mint flavor——♪"

"Then I want..... maccha flavor."

"Hina, Hina wants, umm—that..... soda flavor!"

"Okay~ okay~ I've got it~"

Our first day of living together began like that.

Though I feel a little uneasy about the unpredictable future..... but I'm sure everything will be alright.

But such optimistic thoughts were destroyed almost immediately.

"No way——!"

Miu-chan let out a wail just as I was about to enter the toilet.

"W-what's wrong?"

"You can't enter the toilet yet!"

"But, I've been waiting ever since Miu-chan entered……"

"That's why I said you can't enter yet!"

Miu-chan pulled my arm stubbornly as she said, refusing to let me enter.

"Allowing a man to enter the toilet I just entered…… if such a thing happened I'd die of embarrassment!"

"What the heck is that.....?"

Even though I was struck dumb by such a reason, it seemed like a matter of life and death to her, as Miu-chan looked like she was about to burst into tears.

I could only look to Sora-chan for help, but she was nodding her head in agreement, as though it

was natural.

“That’s… but, what am I going to do then?”

“Please bear with it for a while.”

“How long, roughly?”

“..... for about an hour or so?”

“I’d have wet my pants by then!”

“But I told you, no means no—!”

“If you really can’t take it then please settle it outside!”

And I was chased out of the house just like that.

In the end, I had to sprint to the nearest convenience store while enduring the feeling of leaking out.

Just how troublesome can girls of these ages get?

Do they really have to go to such an extent over the toilet?

However, the problems of living with girls of these ages were far from just that.

I faced another difficulty at about 10pm.

We had our dinner and there wasn’t really anything much to talk about, so I was just killing time by watching television.

It was still okay while Hina was awake, but I really have no idea what to talk about with girls of ages ten and fourteen respectively, let alone have a merry conversation with them.

“We’re going to take a bath.”

Just when I was regretting not having gone to work, Sora-chan informed me, as though unable to take the silence.

“Oh, is that so. I’ll pass you the towels…… ah, speaking of which, do you know how to use the bathtub? If you don’t I’ll teach you how.”

“That’s not the problem; we hope you can get out of the room for a while.”

“Eh… why?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? Where else will we change?”

“Then I’ll just go into the kitchen and close the door.....”

“Absolutely no way! In any case just get out!”

And just like that, I was chased out of the house again.

“Speaking of which, it’s fine if it’s in summer, but what will we do when the weather gets colder.....?”

Can’t be helped, I’ll just head to the convenience store and read some books there. Thinking that, I followed the gravel path to the convenience store.

Because it was near a hill, there was a cooling breeze blowing. But it’s also because of that that there were more bugs around.

I stepped into the convenience store and headed towards the bookshelves as the cashier gave a “Welcome——” lifelessly.

I grabbed a magazine that was about various part-time jobs, and flipped through it looking for any suitable jobs nearby.

Some of the higher-paying jobs were food processing at a supermarket, and pizza delivery. The only problem was the working hours. The working time for the supermarket is from morning to the afternoon, which is a tough period for students.

On the other hand, the pizza delivery is from evening all the way until late at night. Clashes with my current job aside, this would also mean that there would be no adult at home. If it were possible I’d like to avoid leaving those children at home just like that…… truth be told it’d be worrying.

The remaining options would be as a tutor or what-not, but my brain just isn’t wired to handle kids.

“Um—…… this is tough.”

Or maybe I should just drop out of university and get a full-time job? That way, I can reclaim a portion of the school fees Sis paid for me, and then I could use that money to let those children.....

“Ah— doesn’t that mean I won’t be able to get the scholarship as well?”

Up till now, my daily expenses were settled by money from Sis, and money from the scholarship.

Now that I can no longer receive money from Sis, it'd be no small matter if I lost the scholarship as well. Not to mention that university student have student discounts and tax concessions among other benefits, so I can only drop out as a final option.

"But, it's hard to find a satisfactory job....."

"What's up? Segawa-chan, did you want to get another job?"

My shoulder felt a sudden weight, as Nimura's face appeared on my shoulder from behind.

"Uwah?! Ni-Nimura?"

"Yo, long time no see. By the way, where have you been these days?"

"Ah… no… that's....."

It was kind of hard to answer to be asked so directly.

Nimura has seen my sis, and I also went back to her house and had dinner with her three daughters.

Even though I doubt he's the type of person to look at me in a weird way because of this, it's still rather awkward to explain things.

"I just went to a relative's house for a bit."

"Ohh~ is that so. Then, can I come over to Segawa-chin's place next?"

"Eh…… now……?"

"The girl that I've known for a period of time, turns out to have a boyfriend. If I go home now I'll definitely run into that guy."

Nimura..... wants to come over?

This..... isn't good. To be honest, I really don't want to let him see the children.

Even though I believe that Nimura isn't such an idiot as to make his moves on girls fourteen and below—but I still feel a little uneasy.

This guy always attracts all sorts of attention, because he's good-looking to the point it's just unfair.

Yep. There's no way after all. Absolutely no way at all.

“Ah, that, actually I really didn’t know beforehand, okay? Plus her boyfriend, he’s the rugby club president in the university by the hill!”

“Nimura.”

“Eh? What?”

“Sorry, I can’t let you come over.”

“Eh—why noooooooot—if even Segawa is rejecting me, where else can I go?”

“Just find some random chick and stay at her house.”

“Everyone’s gone back to their hometowns because it’s the holidays now. So, please! Can’t you let me stay!”

“Impossible.”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhh—whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy—”

I can’t tell him that my house already has three other people.

“Just give up. Maybe you should consider how you’ll let the rugby club guy slaughter you.”

“That’s cruel?! This isn’t a joke! Seriously, why are you giving me such a hard expression, you’re too cold-blooded!”

Nimura started wailing and begging me ‘let me stay’ with no signs of giving up.

“Speaking of which, why is it that you suddenly can’t let me stay over today—ohhh~ don’t tell me there’s a girl there? Don’t tell me it’s Oda-senpai?”

“N-no way! Why would Raika-san even be there in the first place!”

“True, Segawa doesn’t have the guts anyway.”

It made me unusually pissed off that he accepted that so naturally……

“I-in any case, no means no!”

“Then tell me the reason— otherwise I’ll stuff your mailbox with cicada shells.”

“Are you a primary school kid!?”

If this goes on, Nimura will definitely follow me home. In that case……

“Ah! There’s a man in a rugby jersey looking extremely pissed off!”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhh?! No way?!”

“No kidding, he’s already doing warm-up exercises. You’ll get killed immediately if you step out now.”

“Owahhhhh!! I – I – I’m, I’m going to the toilet for a bit!”

Nimura, whose face had gone completely white, dashed into the convenience store’s toilet, ignoring the cashier’s attempts to stop him.

I took this chance to quickly get out of the place.

After making sure Nimura didn’t follow me, I quickly slipped into the apartment and locked the door. I also put up the anti-burglary chain just in case.

“Huwaahhhh.....”

Leaning on the door and letting out a long sigh, I slid down onto the floor of the doorway.

In any case, if that guy shows up again, I’ll just ignore his existence by pretending that no one’s home.

But about these three girls, I’ll have to eventually tell him about it……

When I broke from my train of thought and looked up, I realized Sora-chan was standing in the room looking at me wordlessly.

“Ah, Oi-tan has returned—”

It looked like they had just finished bathing, as Sora-chan only had a towel on and was drying Hina’s body.

“Ah, no, wait, this is that, er, unforeseen circumstances, erm, or maybe an accident……”

I tried to explain the situation in an incomprehensible manner.

But Sora-chan’s face went red all the way to her ears……

“YAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Sora-chan's scream could be heard throughout the area, and for a moment it shook the entire apartment building.

"I am, really very sorry."

After explaining things to the landlord who had heard and came over, the landlord reminded me about the awkwardness of a grown man allowing under aged girls living in his apartment as well.

He even said "try not to cause too much trouble for others" as he left, with my ears hurting from the lecture.

As I turned back into the room, Sora-chan looked at me with razor-sharp eyes again.

"That…… about earlier…… I'm sorry."

Initially I unconsciously tried to find a reason, but in the end I just apologized directly.

I don't want our relationship to become even more awkward on our first day of living together.

"…… Fine. I'll forgive you."

I don't know if my thoughts got through to her, as Sora-chan sighed.

"The place is small so it can't be helped that such an accident happened....."

Sora-chan muttered to herself, as though she was saying it for her own sake.

"Onee-chan was overreacting. It's not like you were completely exposed."

"I-I so did not overreact! I-It's just that it's embarrassing or something like that....."

Sora-chan lowered her head in embarrassment at Miu-chan's words.

As expected, girls at this age are hard to understand. Just as I was thinking of this, I heard a clear thud. Hina's head had hit the table from losing to her sleepiness.

Such a cute sleeping face swept away every trace of nervousness in the room.

"Hina's already like this, we should prepare for bed as well."

Next problem would be who sleeps where.

First thing would be to move the table to the corner of the room to make space.

“Ah, this is bad. There’s only one mattress.”

Not to mention this was brought over by Nimura.

Even though the measurements are quite big, it’s still not enough for three people to sleep in.

“Okay, let’s do it like this then. Sora-chan and Hina can sleep on the bed, and Miu-chan can use the mattress.”

“Eh..... if we do it like that.....”

“I’ll just find a spot on the floor somewhere.”

“T-That won’t do!”

Sora-chan said hurriedly.

“That’s right, even if it’s summer, you’ll catch a cold sleeping on the floor.”

“I’ll just pad it up with two or three blankets.”

Nimura slept like this in the past anyway.

However, Sora-chan wore an expression that said she would not accept it no matter what.

“Really, it won’t do if we're the only ones sleeping on the bed.”

“But it can’t be helped either, right?”

“Ah, I just had a good idea.”

Miu-chan clapped her hands as though she thought of something.

Miu-chan’s ‘good idea’ was in actuality very simple, but it was also an embarrassing one.

“That way, everyone can sleep on the mattress.”

“Er, mm… well.....”

We arranged the fold-able bed a little, and placed the two mattresses together.

Like this, it looks like a win-win situation, but I can’t calm down just thinking about sharing a bed with the three sisters.

“O~ji~san~ as I thought, do you think it’s better for you to sleep between us?”

“No no no, that’s Hina’s spot.”

Miu-chan joked in a teasing manner.

The two sisters placed their little sister Hina in between them, while I curled myself up in a corner. Even though there was no need to be so nervous, but I just couldn’t help but feel that I won’t be able to calm down if I didn’t distance myself from them.

..... Stop thinking, stop thinking. Hurry up and sleep.

The next time I open my eyes it will be daylight—I closed my eyes thinking that.

.....

I can’t sleep at all!

Normally, I never sleep before 12 midnight, and not to mention there are currently unknown statuses of a middle school girl and an elementary school girl sleeping next to me—the moment I think about this I just can’t calm down.

Speaking of which, the biggest problem would be the fragrance that circulated in this room.

I had already realized it when I returned from the convenience store; it would seem that the fragrance from the bathroom had spread to the living room because of the three girls bathing together, plus the fact that they took a long time inside and spent another long period of time drying their hair.

Now that I think about it, it’s quite incredible that the shampoo and shower gel I usually use had such a huge difference in effect when used on girls.

If I’d known this would happen, I would have insisted on sleeping on the floor.

At this time, I have no choice but to use ‘that’—the technique passed down since ancient times: counting sheep.

Even though it’s an old-fashioned technique, it should (probably) prove its usefulness since it’s been circling around for so long.

Hence, the scene of sheep jumping over a fence appeared in my mind.

“One sheep… two sheep… three sheep…”

Something unexpected happened as the count in my sheep farm hit the three digit numbers.

“Mm, mmmmm.....”

Something clung onto my back following that sound.

“Eh… oi, wait a minute, Sora-chan.....?”

It seems like Sora-chan, who had turned over, hugged me as though treating me as a bolster.

“That, this is really bad in many ways.....”

“Mmmm…… what a nuisance.....”

“Woohhh?!”

Why are girls’ bodies so soft, even though at age fourteen they’re supposed to be considered in the middle of growing? Even though those normally slightly-undeveloped breasts of hers can make one aware under such tight squeezing.……

“Wait what the hell am I thinking?! Oi oi, if this keeps up it’s going to be really bad!”

“You’re noisy!”

Slap—!

“Gyah?!”

I got slapped on the face.

Sora-chan then clung even more tightly, as though she had no intention of letting me go.

W-what should I do now?

Should I forcefully push her away, or wait for her to release me……

“Mmmm..... Papa.....”

These were words that clearly reached my ears, even though they were almost covered by the sounds of breathing.

Having experienced such a thing, yet she never uttered a single word of sadness.

Her heart was probably not prepared for such an unforgettable memory either.

For a fourteen-year-old girl, she has already lost too much.

How could anybody forcibly push her away?

The weight in my chest was heavier than how I really felt.

These children who have already lost their parents, if they were to lose another one as well……

I would never, ever allow something like that to happen.

When I opened my eyes, my entire body was numb and I couldn't move.

"What's..... going on....."

I wanted to climb up but my body, from the neck down, just wouldn't listen to me.

"Ah, have you woken up?"

Miu-chan, already changed, looked at my face and asked.

"Miu-chan, m- morning....."

"Please bear with it for a little longer. I think Onee-chan will wake up in a bit."

"Onee-chan……? Eh, ehhhhhhhh?!"

When I looked more closely, I realized Sora-chan still maintained the position from last night and was clinging to me.

If anything, I feel that this position is more dangerous than the one last night.

"Onee-chan has a serious case of low blood pressure. So she'll often unconsciously grab someone for warmth."

"Don't just explain, help me think of something!"

"But isn't it a good thing~ to be hugged by such a cute girl~"

"No no no! That's not the problem here!"

"Onee-chan will keep hugging like that until her body temperature rises. Ah, I'm going to wash my face first. And remember not to wake Hina up."

Miu-chan said that with a candid smile as she entered the washroom.

"J-Just what should I do....."

Just as I was at my wits' end, the door opened and Nimura walked in with a grin on his face.

"Se~ga~wa~kun~! Good morning—! Hey listen, listen, the rugby guy from last night, actually he was a suspicious guy and was later taken away by..... the.....police..... ah."

Nimura froze again.

"Se- Segawa-kun……t-this is……"

"Wa-wait a moment, Nimura! I swear to you, this is a misunderstanding! This child is, um, she's my niece……"

"Mmm—so noisy....."

At this worst possible moment, Sora-chan buried her head in my chest again.

"Erm, this, I think..... I've interrupted you..... Sorry!!!"

"Like I said, what's with that reaction?!"

Later, it took me about an hour of explanation before I could convince Nimura of the current situation.

"Oh—earlier I was really about to call the police, you know?"

Nimura said this as he sat down with us to have breakfast, as though it was the natural thing to do.

"So basically, all three of them are Segawa's nieces?"

"Yes, I'm the second daughter, Takanashi Miu, ten years old. This is my sister, Sora."

Still suffering from poor blood flow, Sora-chan's head was swaying left and right as she ate her breakfast on reflex.

"And, the toddler over here is....."

"My name is Hina! Three years old~!"

Hina did her best at introducing herself as she raised her tiny hand up in the air. Yep~ you're really something. But could you please not talk when you're eating?

"My—everyone's so cute—somehow I just can't tell that you're related by blood, Segawa-chan."

“Are you trying to criticize me..... anyway, why are you eating at my place! The Rugby guy’s already gone, isn’t he? Then hurry up and go back home!”

On the other hand, Nimura was saying ‘why so petty about it’ in a half-hearted manner as he ate his pickled vegetables.

“In any case, Nimura-san is really good at cooking.”

“Of course, in this time and age, it’s no good if a man can’t even cook.”

He glanced at me as he said that. This guy is definitely trying to criticize me.

However, the truth is that the breakfast on the table now was done by him in no time at all.

“So how is it? Are the pickled vegetables nice?”

“Ah—yes, it’s very nice.”

“What, that’s a pretty half-hearted reply.”

What’s the point in getting so excited over pickled vegetables?

“The pickled vegetables are really very delicious.”

“Right—Miu-chan is a really good girl. Not like a certain uncle over there.”

“Don’t call me uncle!”

I don’t know why, but I just couldn’t stand hearing that from Nimura.

“The pickled veggies are nice—!”

“Oh, we’ve got a little connoisseur here. There’s more if you want.”

“I want!”

Hina put out her empty bowl with her hands. Kind of feels a little impolite.

“Just wait a moment.”

Nimura got up in a good mood and took out a bucket-like item from underneath the kitchen sink……

“Oi, wait a minute! Did you marinate that in my house?!”

After a noisy breakfast and Sora-chan had more or less woken up, I told Nimura the whole story in detail.

“I see..... nicely done, Segawa!”

After hearing the story, Nimura’s first reaction was to commend me.

“Snatching your nieces from those relatives who were too much, huh? Honestly, it’s really changed my opinion of you.”

“I say..... things aren’t that simple.”

I said to Nimura, slightly depressed.

Yes, while it sounds easy, the truth is that there’s a mountain of problems.

“But it’s really unfortunate…… Yuri-san was so beautiful and gentle and such a beautiful person.....”

Nimura teared up a little as well.

Even though he only saw Sis once, it’s really a consolation that he could feel sad for her from the bottom of his heart.

Even though I really want to comment on the fact that he emphasized that Sis was beautiful.

“That’s why I have a favour to ask of you, Nimura.”

“Oh, I don’t mind at all, as long it doesn’t concern money.”

“It’s better not to tell anyone else about the fact that these girls are staying here.”

“I understand. It’ll be complicated if you get misunderstood.”

“Because my working hours will be increasing, I’ll need your help regarding these girls and roll call for lectures.”

“Just leave it to me. Speaking of which, why don’t I take this chance to take Sora-chan? As my wife, that is.”

“Ehhh?!”

Sora-chan became as red as a tomato at these words.

“Really, Nimura-san. My sister can’t handle such jokes at all.”

“Ahaha, I’m sorry. Then, I think that it’s okay as well once Miu-chan grows up.”

“Sorry. I don’t like frivolous people.”

“A-Ahaha..... Miu-chan’s pretty strict.....”

Even Nimura, who’s extremely experienced with girls, was no match for Miu-chan.

“Okay, then Hina-chan! Do you want to be onii-chan’s bride?”

“What’s a bride~?”

“Simply put, it’s to stay together with onii-chan.”

“Umm—— no. Hina wants to stay with Oi-tan!”

“……”

Having been rejected three times in a row by the three sisters, it seems like Nimura, who experienced this for the first time, got quite the mental shock from the failure.

“I’ll say this first, Nimura..... if you lay a hand on these girls I’ll slaughter you.”

“I- I was just joking…… hey, Segawa-kun, why do you have such a fierce expression.....?”

Duh, how can I trust a frivolous guy like you with my three cute nieces?

“Really, you’ve already completely become like a father, haven’t you?”

“Father..... me?”

I looked at Sora-chan unconsciously.

“I see..... father, huh — seems interesting. Ah, then how about, next time I won’t call you ‘oji-san’, but ‘papa’ instead?”

Miu-chan seemed to be quite happy as she suggested this, but that way of addressing me is kind of embarrassing, but it might express my current position better than ‘oji-san’…… but as I thought, that way of calling me is a little problematic.

“Um..... to address you that way..... is still a little……”

I’ve got a feeling it might bring about unwanted misunderstandings.

“Even if we call you ‘papa’, you still feel a little unreliable.”

It hurts to hear that so directly.

“Hina thinks, ‘Oi-tan’ is good — “

Call me whatever you want.....

Like this, our incredible life of living together, began.

Chapter 3 - Under the Same Roof

Time passed by itself even without me having to do anything.

Even though there were many things I wanted to start afresh, unfortunately, no matter how hard I was willing to try, it was just not possible.

So the only thing I can do now is to prepare for something better tomorrow.

After finishing my part-time job which shone brilliantly at the top of that "What I can do now" list, I hastened back home on my cheap 7800-yen bicycle.

Until recently, I had never felt that the road from my workplace to my home was such a long one.

The difference to back then was that there were people waiting for me at home right now.

But the problem was, there was also a wolf that was targeting those who were waiting for me there.

"Yo, welcome back."

When I reached home, Nimura was the first to call out to me.

I shot him an unpleasant look as he raised his hand in a considerably lighthearted manner, but he seemed to be completely unaffected by that.

"Oji-san! Welcome back."

"Welcome back."

The greetings from my nieces followed after Nimura's.

They appeared to be having fun chatting, but I was not amused at all.

"I'll go heat up dinner for you."

"U-Uhn, thanks."

Miu-chan took out a film-wrapped bowl from the fridge and heated it up with the microwave.

"By the way, the one who made it was me."

"..... Ah, I see."

I made the most unpleasant face possible.

"Hey hey, shouldn't you be a little more grateful?"

"Thank you. I'm grateful for that. So you may go back now."

"What's with that!? Is that the attitude you should show a friend who comes and makes dinner for you every day!?"

That was why I found it annoying every day. Well, I was worried about having to leave the three sisters at home while I went for my part-time job. So, to have a somewhat trustworthy adult man to watch over them for me, I should indeed be grateful instead of feeling unhappy about it but.....

Regrettably, the house-sitter was a person who had lost the honor one needed to uphold towards ladies sometime during the course of compulsory education, and had never bothered claiming it back from the lost and found center, and that was why I was worried in another way. Aah, I can now understand the feelings of their father, Shingo-san, when he brandished a shoehorn at me.

"Today, he made soup curry for us. It's really delicious."

After Miu said that, I could smell a spicy aroma coming from the kitchen.

"This is even more major than the curry made using roux in Hokkaido."

"Hehh, I see. I might like this better. It's simple and easy to eat, and there are lots of vegetables as well. Teach me how to make it next time."

Even Sora-chan, who had been brusque with me numerous times all this while, relaxed her guard with Nimura. Mmh, is this the true power of a popular man? ..... It's really not amusing at all.

"Hey Nimura, how long do you intend to remain here?"

"Uwah, aren't you being too cruel? Segawa-kun, haven't I been taking your place as a bodyguard for the girls while you were working from morning till night?"

"I get the feeling that the bodyguard is the most dangerous one here."

"That's upsetting. Even I won't lay my hands on a middle-schooler or below. Really."

"That sounds so much like a lie."

"You started hitting on us out of the blue when we first met."

Sora-chan and Miu-chan retorted in unison.

Oh yeah, he did say stuff like "become my wife".

"N-No way, that's just a type of social manners, or should I say a type of habit..... hey, speaking of that, what about school?"

Nimura, who was breaking out in cold sweat under the gaze of the sisters, forcefully changed the subject.

"As for university, I'll continue with that. And I'll go back to working evening or later shifts in my part-time job."

Nee-san had strongly wanted me to go to university. That was why, as best as I could, I want to go through and properly graduate from it. Aside from it being an act of repayment to her, I was also receiving a bursary.

"No no, Segawa-chan, I was not referring to you but to these two."

Nimura was pointing at Sora-chan and Miu-chan.

"The new term is going to start soon, right?"

"Ah....."

That's right, not just university, Sora-chan's and Miu-chan's schools were also starting their terms.

I'm such a blockhead.....

"Huh, you haven't given serious thought to it?"

"..... Uhn."

Oh my god, Nimura clutched his head in an exaggerated manner.

"It's fine. We are planning to take a break for a while."

"Eh....."

I doubted my ears after hearing Sora-chan's words.

Taking a break..... from school?

"We've already contacted our schools. After what has happened, it seems like our teachers are in favour of it."

"This is news to me!?"

"Obviously. We didn't tell you before."

"Wha.....!?"

This was another one of those curt replies.

"Wait a minute! Why didn't you discuss this with me first"

I raised my voice without thinking. Immediately, the sleeping Hina seemed to be on the verge of getting roused and I hurriedly lowered my voice to a whisper before resuming.

"Even if we discussed it with you, it can't be helped, right. In the end, someone has to take care of Hina."

"T-That's right but....."

"It'll be fine. We'll only do it until we find a nursery for Hina."

Miu-chan touched my shoulder to pacify me.

The same Hina we were discussing about was sound asleep, apparently unaware of the circumstances she had been thrust in, as usual.

While getting riled up at my own uselessness..... I decided to skip tomorrow's classes and promptly make a trip to the municipal office and nurseries.

Somehow, it seemed like problems just kept on accumulating day after day ---

A few days later, while walking on the campus, my head was filled with the various problems which had been piling up incessantly.

"Oh, Segawa. Good morn ---"

The easygoing Nimura greeted me in the morning. I could feel that a new wrinkle had been added to my brow.

"So, in the end, you came huh."

He probably meant that I had left the troublesome things to Sora-chan and Miu-chan, while I was attending class on my own.

"No. I just came to make some changes to the modules I'm going to take in the next term."

I was going to reduce my classes to take on more part-time jobs.

While I knew it would be easier for me later if I took as many modules as I could in my first year, I knew that this was not possible for me anymore.

Surprisingly, I managed to find a nursery quite readily. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the accident that Nee-san and the rest were in had remained the top news, and everyone had been kind to me. After telling the municipal office roughly about my situation, before long, people from the toddler counselling center came over to join in the discussion.

However, during the process, upon asking around, I found out that even though it was compulsory education, it did not mean that it was free. There would be tons of necessary stuff like textbooks and other stuff along the way, and I would also need to give an allowance to Miu-chan who was still in elementary school. I might also need to save up for their field trips.

In other words, just sending one child to school was not an easy thing at all.

And I just realized how difficult it had been for Nee-san to make it all the way to this point by herself.

Much to my own regret, it was too late to express my gratitude now.

I would definitely do what Nee-san had done, for the sake of those kids.

"Anyway, for their sake, I have to increase my part-time jobs..... that's right, do you know of any good-paying part-time jobs?"

"Good-paying part-time jobs huh..... won't it be better to ask that person instead?"

Following the direction where Nimura was pointing in, was Raika-san.

"Morning, how are you doing?"

"Ra-Raika-san, good morning! Er, are you going to class now?"

After not seeing Raika-san for a few weeks, it seemed to me that she had become even more beautiful than before.

It made me realize how lonely I felt when I was unable to see her.....

"Alright, so why don't you ask her about that now?"

"I-Idiot!"

"About what?"

Indeed, Raika-san who was our upperclassman might know more about the part-time jobs in the neighborhood.

But then, I would have to tell her about my circumstances.....

"This fella here is quite tight on money now and is looking for good-paying part-time jobs. Oda-senpai, do you know of any such jobs?"

Nimura spilled out everything just as I was fretting about it.

"I have never done any part-time jobs."

"Ah, I see....."

She replied more readily than I expected.

"But..... you might want to check with the President."

"Do you mean Sako-senpai.....? Er, but....."

The president of the Road Observation Research Society, the self-proclaimed third year student, Sako-senpai.

Why was it a self-proclaimed thing, well, at the time Raika-san entered into this school --- no, way before that, he had been a third-year student.

In a way, he could be said to be a guardian spirit of this school.

That was the reason why he might know where good-paying jobs could be found, but, that person's hentaism, or rather, his deviation from common sense made me feel uneasy.

But..... this was a situation which I could not avoid without making some sacrifices.

"You're right. I shall ask Sako-senpai about it."

"Uhn, that's good", said Raika-san as a faint smile surfaced. But, that was followed by her tilting her head to the side,

"But, why?"

"Eh..... ah, but, it's a long story so..... I'll tell you about it another time!"

I pulled Nimura along with me, and tried to disappear from Raika-san's sight.

"Isn't it okay to tell Oda-senpai about it?"

"That might be true but....."

I could tell what the incredulous-looking Nimura was thinking but..... somehow, it seemed to me that I would be letting my worthlessness out in plain sight, and I couldn't say it.

Ego..... you might call it that but since I was the one who had said with confidence, "I am the guardian of those children", I would like to do a little bit more to get things in order.

"Anyway, I'll tell her about it when the time is right."

At the time I said that, the cellphone in my pocket vibrated discreetly.

When I took it out to look at it, it was an unknown number. No, it looked kind of familiar.....

"Hello..... eh."

The caller was somebody I didn't expect.

I headed towards the station on my bicycle after receiving the call.

I stopped my bicycle at a nearby bicycle lot and ran to the meeting place. Even on the afternoon of a weekday, the coffee shop in the station building was jam-packed with customers who were on the way back from shopping.

"Yuuta-san."

Despite all the noise, it was a wonder that Oba-san's voice managed to reach me.

Oba-san waved her hand at me from a seat by the window. This was the first time we met face-to-face since the funeral. I took the seat opposite her and ordered a cold drink. Oba-san continued drinking her tea and waited quietly until my order arrived.

In a short while, a waitress placed a glass of iced coffee before me, and at last, Oba-san looked at me and began.

"Yuuta-san, what are you going to do about university?"

"Er, the second semester started today."

"I see..... please study hard. Yuri-san would also wish the same for you."

She fumbled for an instant when she brought out Nee-san's name.

Oba-san then looked at me straight in the face.

"I'll be direct about it. Yuuta-tan, what are you planning to do with those kids?"

As if to drive in another blow, Oba-san continued.

"It seems like you really are going to take in those kids..... so what do you intend to do from now?"

"W-What do I intend to do, you say....."

"You are in university, and the kids also have their schools to attend. To top it off, the youngest is just three years....."

Oba-san cut off her sentence at that point, and used an even stronger tone and said.

"I'll be blunt about it. It's impossible for you."

"Uwu....."

That was really blunt.

"B-But, I'm making things work."

"Making things work? What do you mean by that?"

Oba-san shot me a piercing gaze.

"It seems like those kids have not been attending school."

"That's just temporary..... once Hina is put into a nursery, I'll make sure they go to school! I have already found a nursery....."

"You can't be called a guardian with that kind of naivety. Listen to me, Yuuta-san, leave the matter of those kids to their relatives, and concentrate on your studies."

"But, if that happens, they will....."

I recalled the distressed expression on Sora-chan's face that day.

"They will..... get separated, right?"

"..... That can't be helped. It's not like their relatives bear them any ill. There are things that can't be accomplished with just feelings alone. After you took those sisters away, everyone was really feeling down."

I see, Oba-san stayed up till the very end on that day.....

"Sorry. But, but the conclusion..... won't change, right?"

"That's right. But, if Sora-chan is willing to stay in a dormitory or something similar, it'll be fine for Miu-chan and Hina-chan to stay together, the relatives had said..... why don't we discuss it over with them?"

..... Sora-chan will be the only one to be separated?

I tried to imagine the faces of the three sisters if I told them that.

Impossible.

In the first place, if I told them that, the eldest Sora-chan, who had a strong sense of responsibility, would be willing to bear with it and stay in the dormitory by herself.

"..... Oba-san, in spite of that, I'll still live with them."

"That's impossible. If it's going to end up with you abandoning them halfway, then it's better to let go now. Please listen to me. Since Yuri-san is no longer around, I'll be responsible for you....."

I stopped listening midway. I was grateful for Oba-san's feelings. But, right now, those words sounded like nothing but a challenge. In response to that.....

Clatter! I stood up and bowed once.

"Thank you, Oba-san. But, I'll definitely not let go of those kids!"

"Yuuta-san!"

I slammed some loose change onto the table and left the coffee shop.

After coming out of the station building, I headed straight for the bicycle lot, jammed my parking fare violently, and mounted my bicycle.

With that, I cycled back home along the main street before the station.

Along the way, the people I passed by wondered about what was up with me, seeing how hard I was pedaling, but without looking back, I rode on. Crossing the bridge spanning over the river, and just as I entered a narrow street, I finally calmed down and Oba-san's words surfaced in my head one by one.

Oba-san's words sounded overly correct, and I could only feel chagrined and irritated.....

Consequently, I started pedaling furiously again as blood rushed up to my head once more.

Unspeakable feelings came and went.

This is too unreasonable. Why don't I have the ability to support those kids?

As a mere year one university student, I would never have thought that I would experience such days of chagrin.

On the very next day, as before, Oba-san's words kept surfacing in my head.

Last night, Miu-chan noticed me moping around and tried her best to cheer me up. Jeez, to have a ten-year-old girl being thoughtful towards me, I must be really pathetic.

Oba-san was right, it was too early for me to be a guardian.

But, even so, I don't think that what I did was wrong.

Even though I was not managing it well yet, I just needed to do my best and make improvements along the way.

After my lessons ended, Nimura and I headed towards the clubroom.

To find out about the part-time jobs that I have asked the president about.

"Listen to this first. 1. A dangerous job which can give loads of money 2. A tough but reasonably well paying job 3. A job which to some, can be said to be enjoyable, and it also pays reasonably well..... now, which one would you prefer?"

"Well, I prefer the one that give loads of money..... but, how dangerous is it really?"

"....."

"Er, don't keep quiet all of a sudden."

It seemed like it was something difficult to say, as Sako-senpai averted his eyes.

"Yuuta....."

Raika-san shook her head, signaling that it might be better if I didn't ask.

"Th-Then..... what do you mean by the job which can be said to be enjoyable to some?"

"Mm. About that, it's the host club before the station."

"H-Host? Er, that's only possible for people with good looks, right?"

"No, that place, if I have to put it in words, is more geared towards the macho type. The clients are all men."

"With all due respect, I'll pass."

I replied immediately.

"So to speak, in the first place I have only one choice, right!"

"What are you saying, the host club "Manly Fellas" will welcome you at any time."

"Thanks, but no thanks! And what's with the name of that place!

Though I was curious to the relationship between that host club and Sako-senpai, I was afraid that I would hear something unpleasant if I questioned further, so I just left it at that.

"So, its number 2. Alright, I'll contact the party sometime today."

"Thanks for the trouble."

Even though I was feeling uneasy about it, I couldn't help but risk it.

"By the way, why do you need money all of a sudden?"

"Well....."

"Isn't it fine? Don't sweat the small stuff! Right, Oda-senpai?"

At my hesitation, Nimura cleverly tried to divert the conversation.

"No, it's okay Nimura. I think it's better for them to know about it."

And thus, I told my upperclassmen about all that had happened up till now.

Perhaps, right from the beginning, I had wanted someone to listen to it. After I finished, I felt kind of refreshed.

"I see, I understand..... it must be tough on you, Segawa-kun."

"Yuuta, you've done well."

"Raika-san..... Sako-senpai....."

I was almost moved to tears.

Even more so after just receiving those unforgiving words from Oba-san, their words sank deep into my heart.

Frankly, I had been fretting over whether to tell these two about it, but it seemed like that was a completely needless worry.

"By the way, Segawa-kun, your house is nearby, right?"

"Eh..... ah, yes, that's right."

"This is completely unrelated to what we've been talking about, but I was thinking it should be

about time to hold some sort of social gathering for the new students. Right now, at your place."

Sako-senpai's eyes shifted back and forth suspiciously.

"Hey, you guys! Why are you looking at me like that! I'm definitely not feeling guilty or anything like that....."

"We haven't even said a thing."

"Ugugugu..... eeh! Whatever, just let me meet those nieces of yours!"

Unable to withstand our gaze, Sako-senpai's true nature slipped out.

"Rather, allow me to meet them, please! Shall I kneel down? You'll allow it if I kneel, right!?"

"That desperation is making me fearful instead! Rather, I'll definitely not let you meet them!"

"Then, just let me watch them from afar! It'll be fine! My eyesight is good!"

"I don't get what you're saying!"

The excited Sako-senpai, who had lost control of himself, with unhealthy looking sweat pouring out of him, desperately clung to me. Frankly speaking, he was gross. His glasses were fogged up.

"Eeh, please calm down, Sako-senpai!"

Nimura pinned him from behind.

"Segawa, run! I'll hold him here!"

"Yuuta, run."

Raika-san said as well while grasping her favorite harisen.

"Nimura.....! Raika-san! Thanks!"

"Little girlllllllllllllllllll! Little girlllllllllllllllllll!"

Relishing the sweet taste of friendship, I darted out of the clubroom. Leaving the cries of Sako-senpai behind.

For now, I shall give up on the good paying job introduced by Sako-senpai and go to my usual part-time job. But, if I don't attend lectures, I won't have the face to see Oba-san again, I thought as I reached my apartment, opened the door, just to find another troublesome thing before me.

"I'm back..... h-hey, what's this!"

A few pieces of cloth were hanging down from the ceiling like curtains, as if partitioning the room into a complicated maze. It was like a makeshift haunted house for the school festival.

"Oi-tan, welcome back."

"Welcome back, Oji-san."

From the gaps between the cloth, the faces of the criminal duo responsible for this state poked out.

"What in the word is this!?"

"Ah, you mean this? How is it? It was really difficult to pin them up."

"That's not the problem....."

"I'm back."

Just as I was thinking about how to point out the problematic part of this situation, Sora-chan, whose figure I couldn't see, had come back. When I saw the bag of bento takeouts in her hand, I realized she was in charge of buying dinner today.

"Ah, it's already done."

Sora-chan looked at the makeshift drapery as she said that in a matter-of-fact manner.

"No no no! That's not it! I was asking why you were doing this!"

I cut in frantically, fearing that I might let this slip otherwise.

"Well, it won't be good if the incident from the other day happened again, right?"

I understood immediately that she was referring to the incident that day when I bumped into Sora-chan when she came out of the bath. Then, for some reason, Sora-chan's face turned red as we exchanged looks and she glared at me. It seemed like she was still angry.

Er, that matter was already over..... and didn't I apologize enough yet?

"Oji-san, it's tough for you to wait outside every time we take a bath, right? And it's getting colder as well."

"Well....."

When I thought about it, October, November was approaching, and it would get colder and colder, and it might be more preferable to go to the public baths every day.

But, even when she said that, this kind of partitioning.....

"With this, Onee-chan can change her clothes in peace, and she won't start clinging to you when she oversleeps."

"I-I won't do that again! That kind of thing!"

Upon saying that, she glared at me again with an extremely angry face. No, even if you say that.....

"Onee-chan, dinner dinner."

"Ah, aah, sorry. I'll get to it right away."

Hina, who had been ignored all this time, seemed to have grown impatient and shook her big sister's leg.

"I'll pour the Miso soup. Ah, Oji-san, please set the table."

"U-Uhn..... wait, where's the table?"

While I was certain that it was somewhere within the jungle of drapes, I could see no sign of it nor its shadow within my field of vision. I wondered how we could have our meals in this maze-like, horror-house-like room.

On hearing my question, Miu-chan answered in a matter-of-fact manner,

"We'll take them down during meals."

"..... Then put them up again after meals? Who's doing it?"

"That of course will be....."

Miu-chan grinned with a smiling face that even idols couldn't match up to.

That means I have to do it huh.....

Even though it felt like Miu-chan had the whole house completely under her thumb, I proceeded to take down the cloth without being told to do so and returned the chabudai back to its original location. Just when I finished all that, Sora-chan brought out a tray of instant Miso soup, a bowl for each of us.

"Hina, hamburger!"

"By the way, Oji-san, we picked yours without asking you."

"Oi-tan, Hina chose it."

"I see..... I'm looking forward to it."

With mixed feelings of anticipation and apprehension, I took out a box from the carrier, it was ginger-fried pork bento.

"Ah, that's mine."

Seems like it's not mine. Following that was a stamina bento[1]

"No. That's mine."

Sora-chan snatched it away from me. That's also wrong? Wait, when middle school girls get riled up over a stamina bento, the world may be coming to an end.....

"What, do you want to say something?"

She readily saw through my thoughts and as such, I turned my attention back to the bento.

Now now, my long awaited bento.....

"..... What's this?"

Only "what's this" could be used to describe the last remaining article in the vinyl carrier.

"H-Hina..... this is?"

"Isn't it kewt?"

Right now, it was a little hard to look at the innocent smiling face of my cute niece.

Even though autumn was nearing, as a pretty healthy male university student, I was not sure what kind of face I should make when a bento that was jam-packed with nothing but mushrooms was put in front of me.

"This bento is made up of mushrooms only eaten during autumn, it seems."

Like Miu-chan said, it had nothing but mushrooms. In other words, there was no meat. It was really healthy. But just mushrooms.

"Didn't you say that you are getting tired of bento, so this should be good, right?"

Though I was pretty sure that the nearby bento shop's menu had almost all kinds of choices.....

"Hina..... if possible, let me have something with meat, or at the very least some fish next time."

"Got it."

I couldn't afford to go for my part-time job with an empty stomach, so I stuffed myself with the mushroom bento while on the verge of weeping.

Then, as I was spending the precious time before my part-time job sipping tea, Miu-chan suddenly snuggled up to me.

"Oji-san, I have a small request....."

"Hn? What is it?"

"Er, you see, we'd like to go out to town on our next rest day....."

"The three of you?"

"Yes. And so..... we'd like some allowance to cover our transport and meals..... eh-heh."

"Uwu....."

Well, if they are going to town, they do need money for transport and meals.

"Er, how much will you need?"

"Around 3000 yen?"

"3-3000 yen....."

3000 yen meant three pieces of 1000-yen notes. It was to be expected. However.

If I put it in simpler terms, it could cover about three to four days worth of meals for us. It was also a figure achieved through saving and scrimping. And all that would be spent in a single day.

No, as a man, I did't want to say things like *"You need 3000 yen!?"*. If I could, I'd hand over it with a generous gesture but.....

"As I thought..... money is tight, right?"

Sora-chan asked with an apologetic face.

"I-It's fine. 3000 yen only? Here you go."

I took out three pieces of 1000-yen notes from my wallet and handed them to Sora-chan.

"Is that enough? If you need more....."

"No, this is plenty."

Even though my wallet became lighter, I thought that it didn't matter. As their guardian, I didn't want them to feel troubled by financial hardships from as early as elementary school. But it didn't mean that I would allow them to waste money.

"Ah, but, don't stay out too late."

I reminded them, to which they energetically replied *"Alright"*.

"By the way, where will you be going? Are you going to watch a movie or something?"

"It's a secret."

Said Hina while smiling secretively for some reason.

A bowl of 200-yen Su-Udon[2] stuffed with free-of-charge fried flour left over from fritters and with half of the soup gone made up my lunch for the day. On careful thought, I could only get nourishment from oil and wheat from such a meal, but with the money I had left, I was nevertheless thankful for it.

"Sigh....."

I sighed out upon emptying the last drop of the gooey broth from my bowl. After this, I had about an hour of free time. While I could go back to my apartment, there were times when I would prefer to be alone like this.

"Oh, isn't this Segawa-kun?"

It was Sako-senpai.

On his tray were a large serving of curry and fried potatoes, a separate plate of kaarage, and also pork soup, in truth, a bourgeois lineup. Frankly, it was an envious spread.

"What's with your simplistic lunch again?"

"You should know even without me saying it. I'm being thrifty."

"That's really admirable."

While saying that, Sako-senpai starting devouring generous helpings of his curry.

"I won't let you have any even if you stare at me like that."

"Gwu....."

He saw through me. He promptly smashed my wild hope of getting lucky enough to get bestowed a piece of those potatoes.

"But, if you are willing to accept a condition of mine, I may think about giving you some."

"No thanks."

"That's fast!? You should at least listen to what I have to say first."

"No, you are just going to ask me to let you meet my nieces."

"How..... how did you know?"

Who wouldn't?

Sako-senpai cleared his throat, downed the rest of his curry and pork soup and continued.

"Regarding the matter of the part-time job we talked about yesterday, the other party has contacted me and wants you to come down this weekend."

"Really?"

"It's just a one-day short term part-time job. And you will get paid in cash on that day itself."

That's great..... with this, I can tide over for a while.

"Details of the contact are written here. Call them later."

"Thank you very much!"

"So, in line with this, a visit to your house....."

I snatched the note where the details were written from Sako-senpai who was mumbling some nonsense, and without waiting for him to finish, I left the school cafeteria.

On that night.

"Eh..... part-time job.....?"

I told Sora-chan and the rest about the part-time job introduced by Sako-senpai during dinner.

It was a monotonous job at a food processing plant from Saturday night to Sunday morning.

It seemed like the work only involved repetitive simple tasks and no moving of heavy objects, so it didn't seem like something that tough. But yet, it was paid a lot higher than expected.

I wouldn't mind working at such a job every weekend.

Even as I told them about it happily, Sora-chan and Miu-chan appeared to be crestfallen.

"Do you really have to go to that job?"

"W-What is it, all of a sudden?"

"Because....."

The two of them exchanged a troubled look.

"Didn't I say it before at the time we started living together? We should make and save up whenever we can."

What in the world are they troubled about?

Even when I asked them for the reason, the pair appeared to have difficulty saying it to me.

"Onee-tan, what's up?"

Hina, appearing to be worried about her sisters, snuggled up to them.

In the end, I went for my part-time job that night without hearing the reason behind their crestfallen looks.

In the place of Hina as well, who had already fallen asleep, the two sisters sent me off.

For some reason, the gathering place was the east gate of the university. Perhaps it was because the participants were mostly students from my university, or perhaps it was merely because the place was a convenient one.

When I arrived on my bicycle speedily, there were already several others who appeared to be students like me gathered there.

After a while, a large van drove up to the front of the gate. And inside it was a well-built man.

"What, there are surprisingly not many people this month."

The man snorted unhappily as he looked at the few of us gathered in front of the gate.

And as if to show his displeasure, his chest covered in a tank top trembled a little.

"And furthermore, they are all so frail-looking..... hey, that fella over there!"

"M-Me?"

"Say your name, your faculty and the year you are in."

"I'm Segawa Yuuta, first year in literature faculty."

"Segawa you say!?"

"Uwah! I'm sorry I'm sorry!"

Just at the moment I gave out my name, the man bellowed at me like an ogre, and consequently, I ended up apologizing earnestly in an involuntarily manner from fear. Then, that macho man grinned, came close to me, and suddenly slapped my shoulder.

"I see, you are Segawa huh! I've heard from Sako-san!"

"Eh....."

Sako-san.....?

"Er, are you an acquaintance of Sako-senpai?"

"Ha ha ha! Rather than being an acquaintance, you can say that I owe that person a few favors!"

Even though I couldn't imagine at all what kind of favors Sako-senpai could do for this man, but the truth was, it was thanks to him that I could get this well-paying job.

"Well, don't be so tense! Loosen up."

But, why is this Mr. Macho touching my body randomly.....

Still carrying a tinge of uneasiness, we boarded the van and left the assembly area.

Driving along the road from the east gate of the university, it passed over a hill and continued all the way straight to the neighboring city.

The van drove for about thirty minutes along that road, then turned into a small road and further drove for another twenty minutes before reaching its destination. The destination was a factory surrounded by a forest.

With just a few lamps attached to the side of the factory, the illumination could hardly be said to be bright. Furthermore, it was surrounded by tall trees which blocked out most of the moonlight.

Clearly speaking, it was eerie.

Though Sako-senpai had mentioned that this was a food processing job..... no matter how I looked at it, it didn't seem to be one.

This factory seemed to have been built in such a remote place because it had something to hide. And to have gathered the part-timers at a time and place away from public view..... could it be some kind of terrible work?

No, Sako-senpai couldn't possibly send me to such a place..... or should I say the opposite?

"Hey, quickly get over here."

On Mr. Macho's urging, we went around to the back door of the factory.

It was already a dark place, and it was even darker at the back door area. Mr. Macho said something into the intercom attached to the door and then turned around.

"Alright, listen up. I'll have you all work here until morning. But let me say this first..... don't speak about anything you see inside to anyone. Got it?"

At the moment things became increasingly suspicious, the back door opened slowly, and we were shoved inside.

And what lay before me was.....!?

"Wh-What's all thissss!"

Well, you might wonder what triggered off my exaggerated exclamation, but in reality, I saw several men lined up by the two sides of a conveyor belt.

To top it off, they all had well-built bodies and it seemed like the narrow work space was filled with their muscles.

"Er..... who may these people be?"

I asked Mr. Macho without thinking.

"They are all my underclassmen in the American Football club."

American Football club..... so that's why they are all so well built. Just as I was taking all this in, Mr. Macho started explaining to us newbies on what our work entailed.

This was the factory of Mr. Macho's family, Hanamura-owned confectionery, and what the rough-looking American Football fellows were nimbly making was their bestseller, strawberry daifuku.

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In a defense formation flanking both sides of the conveyor belt, they set the perfect combination of red bean grain paste and strawberries on top of the white ping-pong sized mochi running on the conveyor belt. And further up, the offense team awaited, and moving their stubby fingers in an unexpectedly nimble fashion, they stretched the mochi and wrapped it around the red bean grain paste and strawberries, thus completing the strawberry daifuku.[3]

It was really a beautifully synchronized teamwork.

"Listen up, even though you are temps, you are a member of the team! A mistake from one person becomes the mistake of the entire team! When things become tough, cry out this!"

""I love strawberries! I love strawberries!""

The American Football fellows chanted in unison at the signal given by Mr. Macho, Hanamura-senpai.

That line didn't sound particularly appealing coming from those brute-like voices.

Anyway, the only thing I knew was that I needed to spend the rest of the night with these hot-blooded fellows setting strawberries on top of the mochi. But, this was when a question popped up.

"Er, just now, you told us not to tell anyone about what we saw..... why's that?"

"Fool!"

Mr. Macho's holler reverberated. Following that, Hamura-senpai shouted, "Look!" and thrust some packaging paper for strawberry daifuku before me.

Decorations of various animals like dogs, cats, rabbits, racoons, and elephants could be seen making mochi, harvesting strawberries and stirring the inside of a pot. This was probably depicting the scene of making a strawberry daifuku.

"The strawberry daifuku from the Hanamura confectionery are made by the animals of the forest! You can't go about destroying the dreams of children, right!"

The nearly two-meter tall giant, Hanamura-san, was serious.

And thus, we 'battled' with the sweet daifuku until dawn.

"The world..... has become white....."[4]

After our work that had gone on for an entire night ended, Hanamura-senpai drove us back to the university with that same van we came in. From there on, I headed back to my apartment slowly on my bicycle.

Frankly speaking, it was a hellish part-time job.

I really wanted to knock down the 'me' who was underestimating this to be a simple and relaxed job from a few hours ago and jam some of that strawberry daifuku into 'my' mouth.

Indeed, it didn't require physical strength. Since at any rate, the work I was responsible for, only involved placing strawberries on top of the mochi and red bean grain paste which are stacked up like a kagami mochi as they ran by me.

But, I underestimated it. This monotonous and yet rhythmical work required substantial mental strength.

It was fine for the first hour but, gradually, my body became used to it and started reacting reflexively, and consequently, I started hallucinating that the world only consisted of me, strawberries and mochi.

I felt that if it had gone beyond that, I might start thinking that I'm a strawberry.

On top of that, the factory was filled with the aroma of strawberries and red bean grain paste. Even though I had not eaten for around eight hours, I felt kind of full.

The only redeeming factor was the feeling of accomplishment and a strange sense of solidarity, when it was time to go back, without thinking, I ended up embracing one of my comrades nearby. This was something I heard later, but every year, it was thanks to this part-time job that the number of people joining the American Football club was never lacking.....

Anyway, the work was tough and I was dangerously close to betting my youth on American Football, but, the pay was extraordinary. On top of that, I could take back some strawberry daifuku.

But never would I want to do it again. Neither did I want to see any more of strawberry daifuku for a while.

"If this is how it is, then it may be better to just work at the convenience store....."

It was perhaps divine punishment on me for thinking naively that money could be made easily.

"I'll sleep once I get back....."

But I had the feeling that strawberry daifuku would appear in my dreams if I didn't bathe and wash off their aroma before I sleep. Completely exhausted, I pedaled up to my nostalgic home.

As I was dragging my heavy feet up the stairs, I could hear a bunch of lively voices from somewhere.

"This voice....."

Having heard them, I crept up to the second floor without making a sound, then stood just below the ventilation fan attached to the kitchen of my apartment and strained my ears.

"Onee-chan, cut those vegetables!"

"How do I cut the vegetables!? I have never really held a kitchen knife before."

"That's the same for me. Well, just cut it in half or something."

"Uwuu..... got it..... ehyy!"

Zuh-dan!(sfx)

"O-Onee-chan, the chopping board!"

"Eh..... kyaa!? What should I do! The chopping board split!"

"Heyy, Hina also wants to helpp."

"No! If you come close to the kitchen, things will really get out of hand!"

"That's right, Hina, you should stay there and rub the meat!"

"Mm, got it."

What are they doing.....?

It seemed like they were cooking something judging from their conversation.

Why would those kids, who have zero experience in cooking, do such a thing out of the blue.....

"Er, the next thing is to grill the hamburger steak....."

"I think the consommé soup just needs to be boiled. Probably."

"Hina's done here."

"And what's left is the salad..... salad right. What do I need to do for that?"

"Hey, if we don't hurry up, Oji-san will be back soon."

"I know, I know!"

Don't tell me they are making a meal for me.....

But why a hamburger steak so early in the morning?

"Ah, I see..... that was why they asked me whether I could skip the part-time job."

They probably wanted to make dinner for me originally.

But, since I suddenly had a part-time job coming in, their plans were changed.

"Jeez..... are they going to make me eat a hamburger steak so early in the morning?"

Even while I muttered that, I could not help but break into a smile.

Even though I was worked up by myself and brought them here, my new place was cramped and they had been making a fuss during bath time, and I had thought that perhaps my willfulness might be causing them trouble instead.....?

Those were the worries I had at times.

Above all, I myself had been weighed down by the harsh reality.

However..... right now, I feel that the choice I made was not a mistake.

"Living with those kids really didn't seem so bad..... right?"

Upon saying those words, miraculously, I could feel strength welling up inside me.

"Now..... even so, I can't enter the house without waiting for them to complete it."

Even though my entire body was swamped with fatigue, I didn't feel sleepy.

Rather, I was looking forward to their completion of my breakfast.

See, if I close my eyes like this, I can catch a whiff of the burning smell..... burning smell!?

"Kyaaaaaaaaa! Onee-chan, it's burning! The patty is burning!"

"No way!? Why!? I did as I was told though!"

"This is not the time for that, open the windows! Windows!"

"Eeww, it's all black, ah-hahaha!"

"Woah!? Wait a minute!"

As I rushed in frantically, the whole room was covered in black smoke.

In the end, it was close to noon by the time my breakfast was done.

It was in fact after the third attempt that I got to eat a half-cooked hamburger steak.

"Fufu, I'm sorry. Oji-san. We're not too good with cooking."

After eating my brunch[5] made from all that hilarious commotion, the very least I could do was to offer to clean up for them.

But, Miu-chan who had noticed that I was still light-headed from working throughout the night lent me a hand.

"No, your thoughts made me really happy."

"Hearing you say that makes me happy. We'll try again and make it better next time."

Miu-chan made a small gutsy pose. If my hands weren't covered with detergent, I would have hugged her then. Seeing the smiling faces of these kids washed away all the tough moments and the unforgiving words from Oba-san. But, Miu-chan had always been a shrewd one.

"So..... Oji-san. There is one thing I'd like to consult you....."

With a devilish smile to which no one could say 'no' to, Miu-chan came whispering into my ear.

Chapter 4 - Memories of Sora

Miu-chan carefully slid the duplicate key into the keyhole, and turned the key while trying to make as little noise as possible. After making sure the door had made a tiny click, Miu-chan wordlessly turned back to look at us, and the two sisters' eyes met.

"We're going in……!"

"I got it."

Sora-chan led the way. She made use of the shadows from the pillars, and dashed into the doorway after making sure there was no one around watching her.

Hina followed closely behind, and dashed inside beautifully.

"Oji-san, hurry up and come in!"

"A-Ah……"

I hurriedly ran into the doorway as well at Miu-chan's urging.

As we'd expected, there was no human presence in the house.

"Phew…… seems like we weren't discovered."

Sora-chan let out a long sigh as she stepped into the house.

"Um, I think there's no need to do this so sneakily, you know……"

"What are you saying? What would we do if we were discovered and taken away?"

Miu-chan puffed up her face a little, a little angry.

Right now we're inside the house my late Sis and Brother-in-law used to live in, which is also the place the three sisters used to call home.

Right now the house should be under the management of the Takanashi household.

Reason would, of course, be because the three sisters who were supposed to inherit the house are now staying in my rundown apartment.

Needless to say, there's no way I didn't notice how out-of-sorts the current situation is.

However, the reason we infiltrated was because we were afraid that we'd run into relatives of the Takanashi family. The drama that took place during the family meeting might continue—for all we know, Sora-chan and the others might really get separated as a result.

Because we didn't want that to happen, we wanted to make sure no one discovered us "infiltrating the home". Even though this idea by itself was full of issues, I couldn't reject because of Miu-chan's pleading. Moreover, the number of things that girls have to bring along no matter what is quite a lot too.

…… As long as my 3-by-2-meter rundown apartment can fit the items in.

I sat down on the sofa in the living room with a trace of worry.

"Then, Oji-san, please wait here in the meantime."

"Ah, let me help as well."

"No way!"

The two of them said at the same time.

"W-why such violent objections, you two……"

"Really, that's why I say men……"

"They're really thick-headed."

I got criticized pretty badly.

I just thought that I'd be able to help if there was any heavy luggage……

"In any case, just stay here and don't do anything!"

"Absolutely! Don't come up without permission!"

After strongly emphasizing that one last time, the two of them went upstairs.

Hina and I were left downstairs.

"Hina—do you want Oi-tan's help?"

"Don't~ want. Hina can do it alone. Hina, wants to find Usagi-chan~~"

I even got rejected from this side.

"Haaahh……"

Am I so unreliable?

But, once I recalled about living together with Sis last time and found my room cleaned every time I reached home, there'd be an indescribable feeling of my knees giving way.

Maybe that's what they call adolescence.

"Speaking of which, there's nothing to do……"

Hina was busy turning the toy box near the TV upside down, and I expected the two upstairs to be busy sorting out their own belongings as well.

Looking at the colourful toys all over the floor, I couldn't help but worry—who'll be cleaning this up later? Don't tell me it'll be me?

I looked around as I considered all these. The house was quiet to the point it bordered on strange. Plus……

"Was this place actually this big……?"

I had already thought that this house was owned by a capitalist the last time I came by.

However, right now it just feels emptier compared to the last time.

I felt another wave of drowsiness as I was thinking of all these.

I'm probably going to blame this extremely soft sofa I'm sitting on.

The surrounding area was extremely quiet as well, as this was located in a residential area.

Not to mention that I was suffering from a lack of sleep due to the night shift at work last night.

It'd be impossible for me not to feel sleepy with all these factors coming together.

"Huaaahhh……"

I couldn't help but to let out a huge yawn.

"Oi-tan, are you sleepy?"

"Mm…… yeah, I do feel like sleeping for a bit."

"Then, it's okay if you sleep~"

"No, even if you say that……"

"Hina will sing for you!"

"Sing…… a lullaby, is it?"

"Yeah!"

Raising her tiny hand up in the air, Hina, who was full of confidence, pestered me to lie down on the sofa, and then sat down on my stomach. At least I won't need a blanket.

"Go to sleep~~ Go to sleep~~ In Mama's embrace~~♪"

She was completely off-tone yet she was extremely excited about it. Her tiny hand was slapping my head as it went patter-patter (she probably wanted to pat my head instead).

In this situation, like hell I can fall asleep. But seeing Hina trying her hardest like this, I didn't want to say anything much either.

I'll just endure this until Hina's had enough of this—I closed my eyes obediently as I thought.

Speaking of which, I slept on the sofa like this last time as well.

That time, this house had Sis, Brother-in-law, Sora-chan, Miu-chan and Hina…… they were all living happily together.

They accepted me as though I was really part of their family and everyone gathered together for a meal……

Ah, so that's why. No wonder the house had become this lonesome.

I had already known, that the days of everyone gathering at the dining table like last time would never return……

In Hina's gentle singing, for a moment, I thought I heard Sis singing a lullaby.

"Eh……"

I suddenly opened my eyes and took a look around.

There was no change in the living room.

No, the light from the window seemed to have become a little dimmer.

Looks like I really did fall asleep earlier.

I took a look at the clock, and it seems like I had slept for about an hour or so.

I'm not even sure whether it's due to Hina's unexpectedly effective lullaby, or me just having a bad habit of falling asleep easily in this house.

"Geh, speaking of which, where's Hina?!"

It's a huge problem for a guardian to leave children unattended for a whole hour.

I was planning to get up and look for Hina but I realized that I just couldn't get up, as though I was being pressed down by something heavy.

"Uwaah?!"

I took a closer look and realized that Hina was tightly hugging my waist and sleeping like a dead log.

"A-and I was wondering why it was so heavy……"

But that's one hell of a hug, considering she's asleep. Are you a koala infant or something?

"Oi—Hina—Can you please release me……"

Since Hina didn't seem to have any intention of waking, no matter how much I called her, I had no choice but to carefully release her tiny hands and let her sleep on the sofa.

She made a slightly unwilling face as she was moved, but she went back to sleep not long after.

"Be good and sleep here, don't go anywhere……"

I took off the shirt I was wearing over and placed it lightly over Hina as I crept out of the living room.

I took a look at the situation upstairs from the hallway, but there was total silence.

Don't tell me they dumped me here and went out shopping again……?

"Oi—Sora-chan—,Miu-chan—?"

Can't be helped, I had no choice but to go upstairs.

Of course, I didn't go up because I had some special interest towards girls' bedrooms. Even I have had experience of being inside a girl's room, even though that was in elementary grade 2.

I went up the dimly-lit staircase as I couldn't find the switch for the lights.

As I went up the flight of stairs found only in suburban houses, I encountered a girl whose face had turned red from her life-and-death struggle with her suitcase.

"Nnn—! Nnn—! U—nnn—!"

Sora-chan was trying her best to pull out a suitcase that was so big it couldn't come out of the room.

"…… What are you doing?"

"Hauu?!"

Sora-chan tensed up the moment she noticed my presence.

"W, W-W- Why?!"

Um, even if you ask me, I don't know how to answer you.

Besides, that should be my line.

To think that she was so focused to the point she couldn't notice anyone else until she was greeted. Somehow, it feels like Sora-chan is surprisingly stubborn in some amazing aspect.

"Well, I can roughly guess what's going on. That suitcase should be stuck and can't come out."

Sora-chan let out a ‘Uu……" at my words, showing a face as though she had hit a setback.

"I think you better not force it, it's better to sort out your luggage again."

"B-But it's just a little bit more! Really! Anyway the luggage here has already been reduced by a lot!"

"……Reduced by a lot?"

"Uuu…… I say. After talking it through with Miu, we decided that we'd each bring along our things in one suitcase. Look, if we brought a lot at once, it'd be troublesome, wouldn't it?"

……One suitcase.

I see, so that's why you picked the largest suitcase and then filled it up to the brim. To be honest, I think that there'd be no point if it were like this……

"I see, but if they're things that you really need, you don't have to be fussy over using only one suitcase; it's fine if you bring more, you know?"

I originally intended to give Sora-chan a little more leeway, but Sora-chan's face turned deep red, either because she couldn't accept my suggestion, or she was embarrassed from being seen like this by me.

"As I thought, I'd better find a way to get this suitcase out! One is more than enough!"

"Wait, hold on a minute! It'll break if you keep pulling like this!"

My uneasiness became a reality in no time at all.

Of course, it wasn't the door that broke—just as Sora-chan continued her tug-of-war with the door, the suitcase, unable to take the pressure any more, broke into pieces with an extremely loud sound.

All sorts of clothes and stuffed toys flew out from inside the broken suitcase like flower petals, and Sora-chan also came flying towards me, having lost her balance.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Uwoaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

I let out an involuntary shout as I caught Sora-chan and fell down the stairs from the impact.

The first time I met my nieces was many years ago.

"I have someone I'd like you to meet."

At that time, I was suddenly called to a high-class hotel in the city by Sis, and it was there that I met the man that Sis was about to get married to—in other words, my current Brother-in-law, Takanashi Shingo-san.

I was thunderstruck when I heard the news.

Even though I had heard about Sis going out with someone, I had most certainly not expected the other party to be a middle-aged man. In other words, the two well-dressed little girls sitting opposite me would one day become my nieces.

No one would laugh it off and accept it under such circumstances. I was also very confused by the situation at that time, because at that time, I was only a middle-school student.

After I finished off the cuisine I ordered faster than anyone else, I left an "I'm going to the washroom" and escaped from the table.

I had no intention of returning to the table as well, after I came out of the washroom. Just as I was strolling around in the elevator lobby, I saw two girls who had just come out from the washroom.

It was the girl who was sitting opposite me earlier, her name was Sora if I remembered correctly.

While we were eating, she was constantly sneaking looks at me, and whenever our eyes met, she'd unconsciously lower her head immediately.

It seems that Sora had just taken her sister to the washroom, as she was drying her sister's hands with her handkerchief.

The first one to notice me was her sister, Miu. After she saw me, Miu immediately became very wary and hid behind her sister.

And then it was the older sister's turn to notice me, and her face suddenly turned red, and she panicked.

Just then, the younger sister ran away from behind her sister's back—Miu at that time always had vigorous reactions with strangers and was extremely shy—you'd never be able to tell by looking at Miu-chan now.

"Ah, wait, Miu!"

Hurriedly running after her sister, but would it really be okay to just leave this person, who might one day be their uncle, without greeting him—

It might have been because she had gotten confused by such a thought, Sora-chan, hesitating and looking back as she ran, tripped and fell onto the floor.

It was painful just looking at her as she fell flat on her face.

I quickly ran forward and helped Sora-chan up.

I took a closer look, and realized that Sora-chan had a face that would break into tears at any moment.

"Are you okay? It's okay not to bear with it if it hurts."

Sora-chan shook her head as she gritted her teeth and said "it's okay".

"Show me your hands."

Sora-chan shook her head again.

"You…… okay, be good and just show me your hands."

I used a little force and opened Sora-chan's hands, and as expected, the skin on her palm had torn a little and was bleeding.

"Uwahh, looks painful……"

I involuntarily mumbled to myself.

"Uuuu…… Nngu…… Uuuuuuuuuu……"

Sora-chan appeared to have reached her limit, as large droplets of tears began to fall from her eyes.

"Uwohhh?! W-Wait a moment!"

It was a first for me to have a girl cry in front of me.

I picked up Sora-chan in a hurry and entered the washroom.

"It might hurt a little, so bear with it, okay?"

I sat Sora-chan down next to the sink, and I washed her wound gently.

After I cleaned her wound, I used my handkerchief to wipe her hands dry, and then stuck a band-aid on her wound.

I always have band-aid prepared in my wallet because of Sis' constant nagging at me.

But, I certainly didn't expect that my own band-aid would be used on a girl.

"How is it? Does it still hurt?"

Sora-chan shook her head as she sniffed; it looks like she stopped crying.

"Okay, let's go back then."

"U-Um……O-Oji-san!"

"Ugh……?!"

I thought I just heard an extremely unpleasant phrase.

"U-Umm…… don't tell me, ‘Oji-san'…… is referring to me?"

"Nnn…… because, Yuri-san said……"

Indeed, Sis had placed a strange setting by saying ‘this is your uncle' when she introduced me.

"If possible, could you please not call me ‘Oji-san'? Somehow I feel repulsed just hearing it."

"…… Then, Yuu-chan?"

"T-This is just like how Sis called me, so please spare me from that."

Sora-chan folded her arms solemnly, and started thinking hard as she went ‘hmmm—'.

After thinking in such a cute way for a moment, Sora-chan's eyes suddenly lit up, as though she had come up with a brilliant idea.

"Um, then I'll call you—"

The ten-year-old girl in front of me, with a vibrant smile on her face, called me—

"H-How could…… N-No way…… Don't die! Onii-chan!"

As I tried my hardest to open my eyes, I saw Sora-chan's crying face.

Urg…… I seem to remember that I fell down the stairs……

Owowowow?! What the hell, the pain from my waist and my back was transmitted clearly via nerves to my brain.

"Hey?! Onee-chan! Oji-san! Are you two okay?!"

Just as I began to see stars from the pain, Miu-chan looked down at us in shock from upstairs.

"Ouch……"

"Onii-chan!"

Sora-chan, who was tightly clinging to my chest and crying, immediately got up.

"Are you okay? It'll be really serious if you hit your head, you know?"

"Don't worry. My head seems to be fine, even though my whole body's hurting."

Tears began to fall from Sora-chan's eyes again as she placed her hand on her chest.

"You see, you've started crying again. You were like this last time as well, you'd cry when you fell down."

"Onii-chan……"

Sora-chan stared at my face with a shocked expression.

"You still…remember……?"

"No…sorry. I just remembered."

I took a cloth near my hand and wiped Sora-chan's tear-stained face.

"Ah, Oji-san. That's……"

Miu-chan suddenly pointed to the cloth in my hand and said.

"Wha……?!"

Sora-chan's face turned green.

Her stunned expression turned into that of shock, and then slowly turned deep red.

"Eh? What's wrong?"

I double-checked the cloth in my hand, and I realized that this pink piece of cloth not only had a silky feel and clean look to it, it also had black lacings, and was quite an incredible piece of cloth.

No, though technically it's cloth, it's not exactly cloth either.

Of course, it's definitely not meant for wiping tears.

"That one is Onee-chan's favourite."

Miu-chan was referring to the piece of cloth in my hand right now, which is what the world knows it as something called panties.

"N-N-N-NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Sora-chan let out an earthshaking scream.

She snatched her favourite pair of panties from my hand, and then slapped me viciously.

"Ouch! Stop it, calm down, Sora-chan!"

"No! Noo! NOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

My face became swollen almost immediately as I took multiple critical hits from a wailing Sora-chan.

The sounds of cutlery rang throughout the house.

Incidentally, tonight's dinner is curry.

Fortunately for us, the gas and electricity were still running in this house, so everyone worked together to prepare dinner.

The curry was accompanied by seafood. As Hina had strongly requested, we added octopus wieners into her portion of the curry.

The taste was still passable because it was instant curry bought from the nearby supermarket. We planned to stay the night here and then go back tomorrow morning because preparing dinner took longer than expected.

"Um……"

I opened my mouth to speak as I couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"It's about time, that you stopped being angry……"

"Hmph."

Sora-chan didn't even have any intention of speaking to me, and snorted unhappily.

She had completely ignored me since the undergarment incident.

I already got slapped for it, don't tell me she's still not appeased……

"Ouch……"

Here it comes again. Every time I open my mouth to eat the curry, my face which was slapped sore would throb painfully.

"Oji-san, are you all right?"

"Er…… I guess so……"

Even though I had already made an ice-pack using a cup filled with iced water, ultimately it's still just an expedient measure I took. To me, it was even an unprecedented "Slapped-by-a-female-other-than-Sis Anniversary". It's a little regrettable though, that it's not related to reasons of romance. However, I guess it's my just deserts for having forgotten our first meeting.

"Oi-tan, does your face hurt? Hina will blow on it for you!"

Thanks, Hina. You really are the most considerate.

"Onee-chan, shouldn't you stop being angry by now? No matter what you say, you can't slap someone after he's saved you from falling down the stairs……"

"I-Isn't it still because h-he……"

In that instant our eyes met, Sora-chan blushed and lowered her head again.

Is it really that embarrassing to have your undergarments seen……?

"Sorry about that, Oji-san. Onee-chan is a really, rea~lly shy person. Last time, a boy in her

class was also……"

"Miu!"

Miu-chan stuck out her tongue mischievously.

"I'm going to take a bath first!"

Sora-chan placed her utensils into the sink as she said that, before going upstairs.

My my, seems like she really doesn't want to talk to me during this period.

After dinner we took turns going into the bathroom.

It's been a long time since I soaked in a bath tub as well.

To actually have the luxury of being able to stretch my feet straight in the bath, I guess it's because I'm too used to living a life of poverty in that small apartment.

"Hina—remember to close your eyes."

"Okay~"

I used the warm water to wash off the soap bubbles from Hina's tiny head.

I used my free hand to gently massage Hina's head, and Hina, who found it interesting, began to laugh happily.

Who'd have thought a child's head felt this soft. Her hair feels very refreshing as well.

I constantly reminded myself not to use too much strength, as I washed Hina's hair, my heart pounding from this experience.

"Okay, are there still any bubbles left?"

"No~"

Hina raised her hand up high.

I lightly carried the tiny Hina into the bath, causing this toddler to be extremely happy.

"Oi-tan! Let's hold our breaths!"

"Hoho, that's pretty daring of you. Don't think you can win against me that easily."

"Mu——Hina will definitely win!"

"Okay, bring it on then!"

We both shouted "Ready~" and then submerged into the bathtub.

I tickled Hina's sides as I stayed submerged in the water.

As expected, she jumped out of the water as she puffed out air.

"Oi-tan is sly~!"

"Muahahaha, adults are sly creatures."

"Again! Don't cheat~!"

"Okay, okay, no cheating this time."

Of course I'm lying to you.

"If you're lying, I'll ask Onee-chan to hit you!"

"Urg…… Hina, don't bring out your sister at a time like this……"

Just like that, the two of us played in the bath for quite a while, and I also got to enjoy a soak in a bath for once after a long time.

Because it took some time to prepare dinner, by the time we came out of the bathroom, it was already past nine.

Just as we were drying our hair and preparing for bed.

"Nnn—……"

Hina was the first one to succumb to sleep, and she was already slumbering in Sora-chan's arms before we were done.

"I'll go up and put Hina in bed."

"Onee-chan, need my help?"

"I'm fine by myself."

Sora-chan shook her head and brought Hina upstairs.

I guess I might as well turn in early tonight too. There won't be anything else for me to do here anyway, other than watching television.

That one-hour nap earlier wasn't enough to ease the severe lack of sleep I have.

"Miu-chan, I'm going to bed as well. Can I sleep in the guest room on the first floor?"

"Okay, the bed's already prepared for you."

Just as Miu-chan said, there were already a set of sheets and a mattress prepared.

Like that, I lay on the mattress quietly. The new sheets still had a smell of mothballs, and for some reason it gave me a sense of nostalgia.

I began to toss and turn but I just couldn't fall asleep.

"I can't sleep……"

I wondered if it's because sleeping at ten was too early for me, or if it's because I'm just not used to sleeping in such a big room all by myself……

I just couldn't calm down for some reason, and I kept changing my sleeping posture non-stop.

I don't know how much time had passed.

I heard the sound of someone walking down the stairs.

Is it a trip to the toilet, or just to get a cup of water……

The footsteps in the hallway became louder as it came closer, and stopped outside my door.

With a sliding sound, the door opened and someone walked in.

"Sorry to intrude~……"

"M-Miu-chan? What's wrong?"

"Ehehe…… can we sleep together?"

"Erm…… well, I'm fine with that……"

At my words, Miu-chan had a relieved expression as she happily ran into the room. She pulled out another mattress and set it next to mine.

"I think I've become used to life in the apartment…… somehow I just couldn't sleep."

"Is that so……"

"Hehe, somehow it feels a little embarrassing."

Miu-chan, for once made an expression of embarrassment, and used the sheets to cover her face slightly. It's a slightly childish action, but it makes one feel at ease.

"Me too…… I just felt that this room was too big and I just couldn't fall asleep."

"Oji-san too?"

Miu-chan poked her head out and looked at me.

"To actually think that a smaller room is better, I guess I'm too used to a life of poverty."

"If that's the case, then I'm the same. Everyone's used to a life of poverty."

We looked at each other and couldn't help but smile wryly.

"So you really ARE here……!"

This time it was Sora-chan, who was carrying Hina as well.

"Hina wants to sleep with Oi-tan too~"

"Uwaah?!"

Hina slid out of her sister's arms and landed on my stomach with a thump.

Damn, you three-year-old. I almost suffocated thanks to you.

"Really, Miu…… I was still planning to talk with you for a bit, yet you……"

"That's because it's just hard to calm down when you're alone. Speaking of which, you can't sleep either, right? Onee-chan."

"Wha…… I'm not the same as you."

"Lies. Explain the pillow in your hands."

"T-this is, um……?!"

Sora-chan hid the pillow behind her back in a panic, and her face turned even redder from embarrassment.

"Whatever the case, please help me get this one off me quickly……"

In the end, we slept in the ‘river' character, just like how we slept back in the apartment. However, strictly speaking, this time there's an extra stroke. (Note: ‘River' = 川)

The one sleeping in the middle is me. Sora-chan and Miu-chan were sleeping on each of my

sides. Hina, on the other hand, was sleeping between Sora-chan and I, but occasionally she'd roll over me to sleep beside Miu-chan.

Hina, please stop rolling over me.

"Can I lean a little closer, just for a little bit?"

Miu-chan asked me.

"Sure……"

"M-Me too!"

Sora-chan, refusing to admit defeat, squeezed in closer to me than Miu-chan.

Even though there was more than enough space for everyone to sleep in, why would there be a need to squeeze so closely together…… I felt a tinge of gratification even though I was thinking that.

"I guess…… it's because I'm being trusted……"

"Oji-san, did you say something?"

"Nope, I didn't say anything at all."

"You liar, you were definitely laughing to yourself."

Sora-chan pinched me in the side as she stared at me.

"Why'd you pinch me?!"

"I just felt annoyed."

That's a little too much. I'm your senior as well as your guardian, you know.

"Hina too~"

"Grrfuu?!"

Hina, that technique of yours, it's actually called the Flying Body Press, you know?

"Onee-chan's sly~"

Miu-chan squeezed in even closer and clung to me tightly.

"Hey! Miu! Let go!"

"No~ way~"

"Att~ack~"

"Guwohh?!"

A perfectly executed suicidal-style elbow, she's clearly a toddler yet where does she learn all this?

"Onii-chan too! Stop laughing to yourself!"

"Like I said, when did I laugh to myself?!"

Just like that, our family continued our lively night.

However, I overlooked two things.

The three sisters would never ever go near Sis and Brother-in-law's room.

…… And also, that rabbit doll in Hina's arms that was extremely important to her.

In the second week, Hina started going to kindergarten. Sora-chan and Miu-chan returned to school as well.

As for myself, I began a new job.

The one who recommended me this new job was the American football team captain, as well as the factory manager's son—Hanamura-senpai.

The job scope was everything and anything physical within the factory. This included moving the goods onto the truck, and even the packaging itself.

The working hours and shifts also became more flexible, and I can often bring back the snacks that are about to expire home.

After knowing of my situation, Hanamura-senpai didn't hold back in helping and looking after me, which is why I could get a job with so many benefits.

Thanks to Hanamura-senpai, my poor financial state improved greatly, and I could finally spend some time on studying.

However, the next problem was that I didn't show my face in the clubroom for the past few days.

It can't really be helped either, since I have to juggle my university classes and my part-time

jobs, and I also have to consider the timing for the kindergarten. With all these factors, there's no way I'd have extra time for club activities.

Just as I was pondering on whether to continue being a ghost member, or just hand in my club resignation form—

Once my classes ended, I headed in the direction where Hina's kindergarten was located.

Usually, picking Hina up was Sora-chan or Miu-chan's job, but today, both of them seemed to have something going on, so it's my turn to go pick Hina up.

I went through the kindergarten's gates, and the one to meet me by the shoe racks was the kindergarten teacher I'm acquainted with.

"My, today it's ‘Oi-tan' who came."

"Yes…… um, please don't call me that……"

It's conflicting to be called that by a female who's visibly older than you.

The kindergarten teacher ignored my mood and shouted inside: "Hina~ someone's here to fetch you—"

"Oi-tan!"

Hina sped into my arms once she saw me, and I made use of the force to carry her up.

"Yo, I've made you wait."

"Today it's Oi-tan?"

"Your sisters have something going on in school today, so they'll be a little late. You don't like Oi-tan to come fetch you?"

"No! Hina likes Oi-tan!"

Hina suddenly planted a kiss on my face as she said that. But rather than kiss, it was more like she sucked forcefully, causing my face to be covered with Hina's saliva.

"Uwooh?! Hina, where did you learn this?"

"Ki~ss, I learnt this from Takeshi!"

"Takeshi…… is it?"

Wow, Takeshi-kun, you must be pretty daring to lay your hands on my cute niece.

This kind of thing must be nipped in the bud.

"Hina, where is this Takeshi now?"

"Takeshi…… is over there!"

I looked in the direction Hina pointed towards, and there was a cocky brat with mid-length hair playing in the sandbox.

"Okay~ Hina, wait here for a bit. I've got something to talk about with that brat—"

"Segawa-san. You can't."

The kindergarten teacher had a pleasant smile on her face while keeping a tight grip on my shoulder.

What are you doing, let me go. Protecting his niece is an uncle's job……

"Hina, why don't you go back in and prepare to go home?"

"Okay~"

After the teacher sent Hina away, her grip tightened even further, with no intention of letting go.

"Segawa-san, even though there are many fathers like you, you can't do such a thing. Also, here's the information regarding liaison issues, please do read through once it you go back~ Oh yes, Hina forgot to bring her booklet today, please make sure she brings it tomorrow~"

Thick leaflets of paper were thrust into my hands. Tch, I guess I'll have to find some other time to lecture that Takeshi-kun.

However, I sure didn't expect that kindergartens would have so much contact-related or report-related issues.

It covered almost everything from a child's lifestyle management and health management to dietary issues and sleeping postures. They then compiled everything into a booklet and gave them to parents.

The kindergarten and the schools nearby have a whole mountain of activity recommendations planned for the parents as well.

In other words, given my situation now, it'd be impossible if I could finish reading this much information each week and memorise them.

Just picking up or dropping Hina off is hard enough.

Do the other guardians really manage to finish all these properly?

Or is it because my family is an exception…… seems like it.

"Um…… is Hina okay?"

I asked the kindergarten teacher with a tinge of worry.

The teacher had a surprised expression at first. But after taking my family's situation into consideration, she gave me a gentle smile and encouraged me.

"She's fine. Hina is a really obedient child, and she gets along with the other children as well. Plus, there are many parents who forget the material or the booklet."

"Is that so……"

The teacher's reply gave me some reassurance.

"Oi-tan! I've made you wait~"

Hina bounced back wearing her yellow hat and carrying her bag.

"Right, let's go back then."

"Okay!"

Hina's smile is the source of Oi-tan's drive, you know.

I held Hina's hand and we walked back home. When we go back, I'm sure we'll find Sora-chan and Miu-chan waiting for our return.

On the second day, I was sitting in the students' canteen eating plain noodles and some onigiri from home when someone whom I knew sat in front of me. This would be the person I can't wait to see the most.

"Ah…… Raika-san."

"Mm, it's been a long time."

Raika-san gave a short reply, took out her small bento box and began eating silently.

It's been almost a month since I disappeared from the club. During this time, I also didn't get to speak to Raika-san.

To be honest, even if I met her, I wouldn't know what to say. Even though I don't want Raika-san to forget me like this, but this doesn't mean I can just abandon Hina and the others and go to the club everyday—such days of internal conflict just kept continuing. I was suppressing my feelings of wanting to see Raika-san, but seeing her eating her lunch silently, it became impossible to continue suppressing these feelings any longer. The feeling of happiness got mixed up with the confusion of not knowing what to do, and they erupted together.

As I was torn between two sides in my heart, Raika-san suddenly spoke first.

"Are you, busy with work?"

"Ah, mm, yeah. Ah, but the job recommendations from Kaichou really helped a lot. That's why I was contemplating going over and saying thanks or something."

"Is that so."

The conversation ended like that.

Raika-san was already a person hard to communicate with, and today was also straightforward answers. The conversation ended too abruptly, which gave me a great disappointment.

Just then, Raika-san's gaze landed on the onigiri I was eating.

"That onigiri……"

"Ah, you mean this? It was made by Sora…… um, the eldest of the three girls. Lately she seems to be putting a lot of effort into cooking."

Other than onigiri, Sora-chan's forte would be curry, hamburg steaks and miso soup. Incidentally, the chances of her burning the hamburg steak is 50%.

"Speaking of which, Raika-san, do you do the cooking yourself? Do you prepare your own bentos as well?"

"Yes."

"Wow, that's amazing. It looks really good. There's no way I'd be able to make something like that, the best I can do is just frozen food."

"That's not the case."

Raika-san expressionlessly covered her bento with her hands. Don't tell me this is her way of expressing embarrassment?

"During this period I did make bentos for my nieces, but their rating was poor. They said ‘Everything in Oji-san's bento looks dark brown", I became a little let down thanks to that……"

But the reason why Miu-chan didn't like the bento was understandable as well.

Roasted fish, egg rolls and vegetables. If I think back about it now, it does seem a little too masculine.

Even I feel it's a little unsuitable for a girl's bento.

"……Cute?"

"Huh?"

"Yuuta's nieces, are they cute?"

Even though we've not spent much time together, when Raika-san asked this question, it meant that she's highly interested—I can at least understand this much.

Which means this is a chance in a lifetime for me.

That night, for the first time I had a guest over at my place who wasn't Nimura.

"I am Oda Raika…… pleased to meet you."

Raika-san, sitting upright at the small table, bowed deeply in greeting.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Takanashi Miu, ten years old. Onee-san is really beautiful~!"

"Hina~! Three years old~!"

As though they were infected by Raika-san, Miu-chan and Hina hurried to make their own introductions.

"…… Hello."

Only Sora-chan kept a poker face for some reason.

"Hey, you must greet guests properly."

This time I got another fierce stare.

What's the problem……?

"Takanashi Sora. Eldest. Fourteen years old."

She did her self-introduction in a terrible mood.

Just what is she unsatisfied with?

Looking at such an attitude, Raika-san's mood must have surely been ruined—

"Haa…… so cute."

Looks like I was thinking too much.

With an enchanted expression I had never seen before, Raika-san was looking at Sora-chan with a warm gaze.

W-what's wrong? What's with the flushed look and the slightly delicate breathing?

"Yuuta…… these children, give them to me."

"H-Huh? R-Raika-san, are you okay?"

"I'm okay. No wait, I'm not fine. L-Let me hug them for a while……"

"O-Okay……"

Even though it was different from what I had expected, but I made a lot of progress when Raika-san came over to my house.

Even though I feel a little apologetic to my nieces, I have no choice but to get their help in order to close the distance between Raika-san and I.

"Hey~ Hina, come over here."

"What~ is it~"

Hina ran over with a patter and she sat down in my lap naturally.

This action of Hina's seemed to have gotten Raika-san even more fired up. She took out her handkerchief and laid it out on her own lap.

"Come on!" –Raika-san signaled to me with her eyes.

As expected, a toddler's cuteness applies to people of all ages and gender.

"Hina, this Onee-san wants to play with you."

"Really, Hina's very busy~"

"Well, don't say such things…… I'll buy you ice cream, okay?"

"It can't be helped~"

Hina, who was smiling widely, walked towards Raika-san.

"Waaaah……"

Hina obediently sat on Raika-san's lap.

"…… How cute. What a nice smell…… Huhu…… Uhuhuhu"

It made me very envious to see Raika-san's enormous breasts supported by Hina's tiny head.

"Hey~ Hey~ what are we playing~?"

"L-Let's read a book then."

"Book~? What book? Hina wants Chindewella!"

"Chindewella……?"

It seems that Raika-san still can't understand Hina's special terminologies.

"It means she wants to read Cinderella. The book's on that shelf over there, so please read it to her."

"Okay, I got it."

Very quickly, Raika-san began reading for Hina who was sitting on her lap.

Yep, this is such a soul-cleansing scene.

…… And Raika-san is at my place right now, it's like we're a family!

F-F-Family…… I almost got a nosebleed just from my imagination. To my nieces, I thank you.

"Oi-tan, come and read too~"

"O-Oh. I got it."

What an unexpected turn of events. I went over to Raika-san's side and looked at the picture book in her hand with a mixture of uneasiness and excitement.

Now our distance is only a few centimeters. Hina, good job!

"If you look closely, you really look like parents with their child~"

"No, this…… um…… awuu"

Miu-chan closely followed with amazing support. The blushing Raika-san's reaction was truly a feast for the eyes. Family! Parent and child! Rather than the result, I'm looking forward to the process more!

I cheered for Miu-chan in my heart.

"Papa and Mama……?"

Hina turned around to look at both my face and Raika-san's face.

But I think that I couldn't have wished for this last blow more, because in our midst there's someone who doesn't find this situation amusing at all.

"I-I'm coming over too!"

Sora-chan stood up violently and squeezed herself between Raika-san and I.

"O-Oi, why must you sit here?"

"I want to! I insist on sitting here!"

Saying that, Sora-chan hugged Raika-san's arm. The latter also made a solemn face.

"Sora-chan…… how cute. Would you like to be my younger sister?"

……Hey— um, Raika-san?

"Ah, then me too~"

Miu-chan took Raika-san's other side.

"Miu-chan…… has a nice smell…… damn you Yuuta, I'm so envious of you."

Raika-san seemed to have gone nuts…… she's becoming more and more abnormal as she's surrounded by Sora-chan and Miu-chan beside her, as well as Hina who's on her lap.

"O-Oi, you'll be causing trouble for Raika-san……"

"I don't mind at all!"

Raika-san, whose face became a deeper shade of red, and opened her eyes wide!

…… Erm, Raika-san? Your character setting's a little strange, you know?

Just like that, it turned into a scenario where I was completely left out.

"Hey~ Onee-tan~ hurry up and read~"

"Is it really okay for me to do so? If possible I'd even read to you for the next 18 hours."

"Isn't it obvious? Look, we're just like four sisters now."

As she said that, Miu-chan looked at me and gave me a meaningful smile.

…… It's on purpose.

They definitely left me out on purpose.

Urgh…… if possible I'd like to join in too!

But I really don't have the courage to do so when faced with such a powerful girls' formation.

To give an example, this obstacle here is about as difficult as an old man running through a girl's college alone.

At this point, I can only try and find the weak spot in this wall of steel, and from there I will break through……!

"Hina~ would you like to play a game with Oi-tan?"

"A~ game~?"

"Yeah, it's something Nimura left here, it's a little old, but it's quite addictive and fun!"

"But, Chindewella isn't over yet. Hina wants to be with Onee-tan!"

"Whatttttttttttttt?!"

To think that my reinforcement betrayed me.

"That's right, it's a hundred times better to be with Raika-san who's cool and gentle, than to be with that perverted Onii-chan."

"It's true, Raika-san's not only cool, and she also has a great figure. Don't tell me you're a model?"

"No, that's not the case…… because it's embarrassing."

She really is popular. That ‘weirdo' image that she has in school has been completely swept away, and in place of it was a pure and shy beauty, though whether I can use the term ‘pure' leaves to be questioned.

The fact that Raika-san's a weirdo probably can't be changed, but to think that she'd be so obsessed over cute things, it's really something you don't see every day.

As I was left out, I could only watch these four sisters get along while strolling like an idiot. Suddenly, Sora-chan's voice rang out coldly.

"Ah, that's right. Since you're free, go prepare dinner."

"I want pasta~"

"Hina wants hamburg steak! Those kinds with cheese inside!"

"Urgh, I got it! I'll go prepare dinner!"

In the end, besides preparing dinner, I was even sent out to buy snacks. I've been completely treated as a gofer.

"Then, I'll send Raika-san home. Remember to lock the door and windows after I leave. Lock up everything except the chain lock on the door."

Raika-san and I left the apartment after I instructed the three sisters, who stayed behind.

The hill at night had completely turned cool, and it'd still be chilly wearing just a T-shirt, so I pulled on an extra shirt.

As we walked side by side, Raika-san suddenly spoke up.

"…… It was really a great time. Cuteness is justice. Cuteness is the best. Kaichou was right."

Raika-san placed her hand onto her chest, as though still immersed in Hina's touch and smell.

"Haha, it's still a first for me to see Raika-san like that."

"…… I like cute children, because I'm not cute at all."

Reverting to her usual expressionless self, Raika-san muttered under her breath.

"Raika-san?"

Just as I was about to look into her face, Raika-san suddenly looked at me.

"Yuuta…… is work tough?"

"U-um…… I'd be lying if I said it wasn't, but it's for living expenses, after all."

It's been a few months since the entrance ceremony. So many things happened that it's tiring just thinking back about it. One of the things that gave my life a complete turn would be taking in the three sisters, and meeting Raika-san before that. Even though I've had no time to show myself in

the club room ever since such a life started, it's also because I took in the three sisters that I can be alone with Raika-san now.

"It's been lonely because Yuuta never really shows up for club activities these days."

"Lonely…… eh? Who?"

"Kaichou."

"……"

What the hell, should I feel happy or not?

"I also…… feel a little lonely."

"Eh……"

Using a voice that could have been missed out, Raika-san had indeed said it.

"E, erm, Raika-san, does that mean……"

"Good night."

Raika-san coolly said that as she quietly walked away.

RAZY

At this moment.

"Onii-chan you blockhead, idiot……"

Sora-chan squatted in the corner of the room, muttering non-stop under her breath as though reciting curses.

"Onee-tan, what's wrong~?"

Even Hina had an incredulous expression as she saw Sora-chan like this.

On the other hand, Miu-chan, who knew what was going on, simply shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah~ looks like the damage this time's quite heavy…… Hina, it's almost time for bed, go brush your teeth."

"Okay~"

At Miu-chan's gentle reminder, Hina ran into the bathroom with a pitter-patter.

Looking at Sora-chan who was still squatting there with no reaction, Miu-chan said in a low voice:

"I don't think it's that kind of three-sided relationship……"

"B-be quiet! I'm not taking anything to heart!"

Even though her expression showed otherwise, Sora-chan was serious as well.

To be honest, Sora-chan also understood that Yuuta didn't do anything out of line. But the moment she thought about that beauty beside him and the foolish smile he'd have on his face, dark feelings would burst out from deep inside her heart, unable to stop.

"Onii-chan you blockhead, idiot, lecher, pervert, paramecium, grasshopper……"

Somewhere in the middle, the cursing, incomprehensible in more ways than one, resumed.

"Really, Onee-chan, it's about time you stopped, you know? Being jealous is one thing, but what'd happen if Hina picked up weird phrases?"

"W-Who's jealous of that guy!"

Sora-chan argued indignantly.

"Besides, isn't it because you said something unnecessary like ‘they look like parent and child~'?"

"It's not unnecessary, because they really did look like it earlier."

Miu-chan retorted as she stood her ground.

Looking at her growing younger sister, Sora-chan felt that she's been bullying people more ever since they moved here—especially her older sister. To think that in the past she was unwilling to go to the toilet alone, and would always hold her hand……

But the problem isn't there.

The most important problem would be that person—Oda Raika's relationship with Yuuta.

Sora-chan also understood that they were both from the same club and had a senior-junior relationship, and she also noticed that Yuuta had at least some feelings for her. But how far have the two gone?

If things go on, it might even change into an unusual problem.

Even though she didn't know the reason why, she could more or less feel it.

"Uuuu~…… how slow…… why the hell would he take so long to send someone home……"

Sora-chan who was jealous kept hitting Yuuta's shirt to vent her frustration.

"If you're taking it to heart so much, you should've gone along."

"There's no way I can do that……"

Miu-chan shrugged helplessly, and she spoke to Hina, who was playing with her doll by the window.

"Hina—once you pack up it's time for bed—"

"Okay~"

Hina obediently put her toys away, before placing the doll in her hand on top of the toy box.

In front of the rabbit doll she specifically retrieved, she lined up her dolls carefully.

"Hina and, Onee-tan and, this one is Oi-tan."

The small dolls were lined up one by one. Finally, she placed the two largest dolls in the middle.

"And, Papa and Mama!"

Hina became satisfied after she finished lining up her dolls.

Suddenly, a large question mark appeared on her face.

"Papa and Mama, haven't returned—…… why?"

The dolls could only listen to the question that this little girl had.

"But, it's okay. I'm sure they'll return soon. Usagi-tan~"

It'll be fine as long Usagi-tan is there.

Because, this is Hina's promise with Mama.

Chapter 5 - "Road Research" and the Three Sisters

All sorts of situations that came crashing down on us caused our time to flow continually.

Among this, were the three sisters who finally started to treat this cramped six tatami flat as their home, and myself, who started to get used to this life.

However, just like small matters that happen daily were gradually absorbed into our memories, the problems that occurred every day decreased, and we came to a realization.

It was a reality that approached us time and again in our happy lives right now.

The fact that the people important to us would not return.

Right until now, we might not have been truly ready to accept this reality yet.

But even so—

Inescapable changes prepared to approach us.

After my part-time job ended for the day, I pedaled furiously on my beloved bike, rapidly returning home.

Of course, that's because my cute nieces were waiting for me at home, but there was another reason—

"Welcome home—"

As soon as I opened the door, a beauty in an apron welcomed me immediately.

"I- I'm back."

Though I was somewhat nervous, I still couldn't stop a smile from appearing on my face.

After the beauty in an apron— Raika-san shortly greeted me, she continued to prepare dinner.

Great…… This is so great.

It was the first time that I knew, the extent of the large breasts caused the apron to appear

extremely cramped.

"Welcome home, Oji-san!"

"Oi-tan, welcome back—"

My nieces who were sitting in front of the coffee desk watching television in a relaxed mood greeted me casually. How should I say this, I feel as though I was a father who was greeted by his wife, and was popular with his daughters…… That isn't right, this isn't the time for me to be happy about this. I sternly said:

"You girls….. Nobody would let a guest make dinner, right?"

"Ahaha…… That's because……"

Miu-chan awkwardly peered at her elder sister who was sulking in a corner.

"…… What is it?"

Sora-chan glared at me with an expression that would make people hear the roar of a beast. For some reason, the child would have a mood swing whenever Raika-san was here.

"Hmp! I'm just useless anyways!"

The situation was clear as soon as I took a look at Sora-chan's hands.

Sora-chan's left hand was stuck full of plasters. And for some reason, the right hand that should be holding the kitchen knife was full of plasters as well.

What acrobatics does she need to do in order to cut herself there with the kitchen knife?

Sora-chan is really unexpectedly clumsy. Queen of Clumsiness.

"As Oji-san saw, onee-chan was abandoned long ago, while Hina and I were helping with other matters."

When I had a closer look, both of them were helping to clean bean sprouts roots with their hands.

"Oi-tan, look~"

Hina pointed at the pile of sprouts that she cleaned.

"Oh— Very good. Hina is so clever."

I pat Hina's head, and that made Hina make cute sounds like 'Wa~', 'Hya~' and so on.

"The one sulking in the corner, thanks for your hard work as well."

"Uuu…… Mnn."

Though Sora-chan looked like she still couldn't take it, she still nodded in the end.

"Are the sprouts done yet?"

"Ah! Done, done! They're all done~"

After taking the piled up sprouts, Raika-san started to cook.

The fragrance of Chinese cuisine filled the flat as well.

Being able to enjoy such happy times, it's a thing that I couldn't even imagine before sheltering the three sisters.

While cleaning the coffee table, I thought in relaxation.

The dinner was completely made of Chinese dishes, and the taste was flawless as well.

Though a three year old toddler might not be too picky about food, but from the fact that Hina even ate all of the green peppers, this is an extremely tasty dinner.

After eating all of Raika-san's specially made fried green peppers, I lazily sipped my after dinner tea.

Even Sora-chan who wasn't too happy just now was smiling in pleasure because of fullness at that moment as well.

"I'm so sorry, Raika-san…… It just feels like you're always coming here to make dinner……"

"It's okay. Because I can see Hina-chan and the others."

After saying that, Raika-san tightly hugged Hina who was sitting on her thigh.

"Ah~ That's~ nice~"

"Come here too, Miu-chan."

"Wa~ Okay, I'm coming!"

Miu-chan walked to Raika-san's side quickly, pressing herself on Raika-san's body.

"Sora-chan, come here as well."

"N- no thanks for me!"

"Don't be shy."

Raika-san enthusiastically opened her arms, making a welcoming pose.

"Oh please! I'm not a child anymore, this type of……"

"Seriously, onee-chan is so stubborn. Here, come over."

"Don't— want— to! Hey! Let go of me! Let go! Miu!"

And that was how Miu-chan dragged Sora-chan over there.

Just like that, Raika-san who now had the three sisters in her hug was flushed without any emotion on her face.

"Yuuta, it's best if you give them to me."

Raika-san said to me in a solemn tone, tightly hugging the three sisters.

"I refuse."

"…… Tsk!"

You don't need to tsk, do you……

Raika-san who seemed to like the three sisters very much looked rather happy.

"Err…… Let me ask this for a moment, what should I do now?"

I, who was seeing the enviable scene, but could only look from the side alone, I tried to ask the natural question.

"That's right…… Why don't you go wash the dishes?"

Miu-chan showed me an angelic smile, giving me the merciless order.

…… Can I only choose to wash the dishes?

In the end, I did the job since I was the only person who didn't help in the preparations for dinner.

Ah~ I feel like talking to Raika-senpai as well too……

When I finally finished cleaning the kitchen, it seemed that Raika-san who finished cuddling the three sisters had to go home already.

"Can I still come over another time?"

"Of course. The kids would be happy as well."

I said while looking at the sleepy Hina on my lap.

I'm not sure if it's because she was too excited today, but Hina started to yawn even earlier than usual today.

"I will wait for you as well."

"I don't really care……"

Miu-chan and Sora-chan who came to send her off said so respectively.

"What about Yuuta?"

"Eh……? Me?"

Raika-san nodded.

"Err…… It's the same for me…… That's right, if you're willing to come over again, I'll be very happy."

"Is that so…… Then I will come again."

The corner of Raika-san's mouth seemed to curl up three centimeters…… When I said that I would send her off, senpai just said: 'No need for today.' And returned alone.

"Ah…… That's nice, Raika-san…… OUCH!?"

I shouted in pain as my backside was suddenly pinched forcefully.

"What are you giggling for!"

"I- I'm not giggling……"

"Lies, you did."

Sora-chan said while glaring at me.

"E- even if I did giggle, isn't that my own business?"

After hearing me say that, Sora-chan puffed out her cheeks in displeasure, and rushed up the stairs into the house.

On the other hand, Miu-chan looked at Sora-chan's departure with a sighing expression.

"…… Oji-san, the way you said that just now was too hurtful."

"Miu-chan…… Err, how is that hurtful?"

"Well…… It's not very appropriate if I say this…… Anyways I think it's best if you buy a cake when you return home tomorrow."

After she said that, Miu-chan took Hina who was already in deep sleep from my hands, and walked quickly up the stairs into the room. Miu-chan's panties was almost visible from below, she really needs to be more careful.

"…… Why?"

I tilted my head, completely clueless about the situation. Just at that moment, Sora-chan poked her head out of the door again.

"We're bathing! Hurry up and hang the curtains! Ah, wait, since you're already outside, just don't come back in so soon!"

Bam! The door slammed shut, and there came the sound of the door locking.

"What's with this……"

I wasn't too sure about the situation, and I could only stand blankly in front of my apartment.

Young girls are really a handful…… My sigh disappeared just like that in the clear night skies that had a hint of autumn.

My tension might be disappearing gradually. As usual, I walked on the campus where the leaves were turning red with my mind full of weariness because of working day and night, when I suddenly heard a person hiding in a dark place call me.

"Uu…… Nimura?"

When I looked closer, Nimura was waving at me while hiding between school buildings.

"What are you doing there?"

Though I called him, Nimura just continued the action.

His mouth opened and closed, as though he wanted to speak to me, but unfortunately I can't read lips, so I had completely no idea what he wanted to convey, The only thing that I could be certain of was Nimura's expression which was rather solemn.

Without an alternative, I walked forward. When Nimura saw me moving towards him, his silhouette disappeared behind the school building.

"Oi! Wait a minute!"

I hurriedly chased after him, and the instant my foot stepped behind the school building—

Whoosh!

"UWAAAAA!?"

The ground below my feet suddenly sank, causing me to fall into the hole head first.

"Ouch…… W- why is there a pitfall over here……"

"Hohoho…… You've been tricked, Segawa Yuuta."

Someone spoke while sticking his head out from the side of the trap.

Since he was against the light, I couldn't recognize his features for a moment. However, from the wide body and unusually high-pitched voice, that person is definitely—

"Sako-senpai!"

"That is correct, Segawa-kun. The president of the Road Observation Research Society, your revered senpai…… that would be me!"

"No, I don't revere you at all."

"You should really go along with the mood at these times."

Senpai changed his previous tone that sounded as though he was playing out an act, and asked in his usual tone.

Sigh…… Is that so?

"Oi~~ Segawa-chan, are you okay?"

After that, Nimura poked his head out as well.

"Ah, you idiot! You actually trapped me!"

"Sorry~ Actually I feel bad about this as well, but I owe senpai a lot of favors. You know, like the rugby team who rushed to my house before this. It was senpai who helped to sort things out with those people. Thanks to senpai, I could finally go home safely."

I didn't even ask anything, but he explained all of that to me.

As though he wanted to restore the previous mood, Sako-senpai coughed faintly.

"Alright, Segawa-kun…… There are a few matters that I have to confirm with you."

"Er……"

"Yesterday night, did Miss Oda Raika, a member of us 'Roary', go to your house yesterday?"

"Y- yes."

"I heard that she enjoyed a pleasant dinner with your nieces, is that correct?"

"Err, yeah…… That's probably right."

How does Sako-senpai know about this?

Raika-senpai probably wouldn't just tell Sako-senpai about this, however……

"Judging from your expression, you're probably wondering how I know this, right?"

As I was thinking about this, Sako-senpai, who noticed my expression, smiled evilly.

"Oi! Bring her over here."

After senpai gave the order by raising his hand, a deep voice shouted 'Okay!' from somewhere.

Not long after that, accompanied with cries of 'Hah, hah!', Raika-senpai, who was tied to a thick branch, was carried over by the rugby club members.

"Ra- Raika-san!?"

"Hello~"

Raika-san answered casually, in sharp contrast with the current situation.

"Sako-senpai! No matter how you see it, this is just too much! You actually tied up a girl!"

"W- wait a minute, wait a minute! Don't you misunderstand! She suggested that herself!"

"Eh……?"

Raika-san asked for that herself?

"Err…… Raika-san?"

"Yeah, it's quite interesting like this."

Raika-san said with her eyes glinting in pleasure.

It seems that Sako-senpai wasn't lying.

"By the way, she was the one who suggested the trap as well. I originally thought that it would be better to let the strong rugby club members grab you here directly, but…… This is really not easy! Like digging such a big hole, and stuffing the bottom full of sponge so that people wouldn't get hurt when they drop down."

I do not care about any of this.

Besides, why didn't they just use the phone or send a message to ask me to come here……

"I want to confirm the second thing. I introduced you to a job once, right?"

Senpai lowered his head and asked me above the trap.

"Yes…… That really helped me a lot."

"Right! That is correct! This means, you owe me a huge favor!"

Sako-senpai continued agitatedly.

"Even so! You welcomed Oda-kun who doesn't owe you favors to your house, and didn't even mention this to me, is that correct!?"

Sako-senpai pointed at my face while shouting loudly.

"Anyway, senpai wants to say, just let him see your nieces as well. That's all."

Nimura explained.

"Really, why didn't you just say so directly?"

"Oh! Then……!?"

"I refuse."

"Why—!?"

Sako-senpai shouted.

"Do you really need to ask? Putting my cute nieces in front of Sako-senpai is similar to putting an anthill in front of a large anteater."

"Why would you think of that analogy?"

"Well, it just feels like that in some way."

I answered the dazed Nimura who asked me that.

"Why—!"

Sako-senpai started to whine again.

"I bathed every day just for this day, and even cut my hair! I even changed my glasses!"

When he said that, I noticed that senpai's usually greasy hair looked rather clean today. And his glasses looked a bit different from before, though I couldn't see it at all.

"Darn….. I- I……. I want to have dinner with cute loli girls as weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeell!"

It was a sorrowful shout that came from the soul. It really makes people feel unsure whether to feel pity or sad about it……

And also, 'Roary' should refer to 'Road Observation Research Society' and not 'Lolicon Research Society', right? [6]

"…… Sako-senpai, do you have this kind of interest?"

"Mnn? What does this kind of interest mean?"

"……. Which means…… Err, like having more interest in younger girls….. Anyways it's your sexual preferences……"

"Hmph! Don't get me wrong. I'm just your usual young man who wants to spoil a young loli girl, and I'm definitely not a lolicon. If the problem can be solved, I would even agree to the Children's Ethics Act. However, 2D ones are another story!"

For some reason…… I just couldn't trust this guy at all.

"Trust him, Kaichou will definitely not harm them."

Even though Raika-san's all tied up, she looked like she was unharmed no matter how you looked at it.

Indeed, senpai is a good person…… It's just that he's a bit of a hentai.

"I…… I actually wanted to be a kindergarten teacher….."

Senpai started an unpersuasive monologue, while the rugby club members who were pretending to cry at the side made me feel weary as well.

Raika-san, Nimura and I looked at each other and sighed. The two nodded at me slightly.

"Alright."

"You can come over to my house tonight."

"Eh…… Really?"

"Sako-senpai took care of me a lot, and those kids would probably be happy if there are more people."

Hearing me say that, his eyes suddenly glistened from tears.

"You….. You're really……"

Sako-senpai held back the tears brimming in his eyes, while looking at me in a solemn way.

"Segawa-kun! If it were you, I believe that you can take the position of the next president of the Road Observation Research Society any time."

"Well….. Let me consider it first."

In any case, you'll have to let me make sure if this is a Lolicon Research Society.

I couldn't help but have that thought.

Because Sako-senpai kept pestering me, saying that even one second faster would be good, we went home rather early.

As senpai said that he had some preparations to do, Nimura, Raika-san and I went to my home first to undergo some preparations.

"I'm back…… Eh? Why?"

Sora-chan who carried Hina home froze just like that at the front door.

"Onee-chan, what is it…… Eh?"

After that, Miu-chan who poked her head from behind Sora-chan looked rather shocked as well.

"Welcome home~ Sora-chan, Miu-chan, and also Hina."

"Welcome home."

"Erm…… Nimura-san….. And even Raika-san is here. Is there anything wrong?"

"Today…… I'm thinking of having a steamboat together."

While answering my niece's question, I placed a small gas stove onto the table.

"Is there anything wrong? Why are we suddenly……"

Sora-chan asked with slight suspicion.

"Isn't it fine doing this once in a while? Ah, that's right, that's right. There will be another guest coming here later."

"Oh? What kind of person is he?"

Though Miu-chan asked with great interest, regardless if it's Nimura or I, it's hard for us to answer her.

"He's our senpai from our club…… Errr…… Anyways, you'll know when he comes."

I answered vaguely. After all, I can't just answer honestly, right?

Ding dong!

While we were in a conversation, the electric doorbell rang. Most probably…... No, it's certainly Sako-senpai.

"Coming~ I'm opening the door immediately~"

Miu-chan who stood at the front door turned around to open the door, and the person who appeared outside was……

"T- thank you for asking me to come here today, i- it is my greatest honor and pleasure to attend!"

And the person who appeared outside the door was Sako-senpai, wearing a suit and a bowtie + rose bouquet. His attire made people think that being unclear about the situation should really have its limits. Senpai's entire body was sweating bullets, and he took out what looked like a high class handkerchief to wipe off his sweat.

"P- p- p- please accept this!"

After that, senpai suddenly shoved the bouquet in front of Miu-chan.

"Uwa……. These flowers are really pretty. Thank you."

Facing the completely unfamiliar Sako-senpai who was acting oddly, Miu-chan accepted the bouquet unhesitatingly. It's a really sedate reaction that only a person who accepts tens of bouquets every day would have.

"Ah! I haven't introduced myself, right? I am Takanashi Miu. What's your name?"

"I- I am Segawa Yuuta's senpai, I am Sako….."

Senpai who planned to introduce himself under Miu-chan's guidance stopped as though someone suddenly pressed the pause button.

Senpai's eyes were completely glued onto Miu-chan.

For some reason, that gave me an extremely queasy feeling.

"So you're Sako-san? Thanks for taking care of Oji-san."

With a smile on her face, Miu-chan bowed to senpai.

"Angel……"

Sako-senpai spoke blankly.

My uneasy feeling seemed to have come true.

After that, we spent some time chatting happily together.

"Uwaa!? I lost again!"

I threw my video game controller aside, saying that while hugging my head.

As the kitchen was rather small, we handed the work of cooking to Raika-san and Nimura, while we passed the time before the soup, we played video games.

"Really, you haven't even won once since just now."

"Oi-tan is so weak."

Sora-chan and Hina's gazes made me feel terrible. Then again, Sako-senpai was too powerful. It even reached the point where people would suspect him of cheating.

"Hmph…… I will not lose to the generation that's used to playing simple games, for I am from the Nintendo generation."

Though I didn't really understand, it was clear that senpai was undeniably a gaming master.

"That's so cool~ senpai won again!"

Senpai's expression suddenly changed.

"M- Miu-chan. Not really, this is really nothing~ Ehehehehe."

Really, senpai was so shy that it was like he changed into another person.

The excessively shy senpai even gave people the feeling that over half of his body started to melt.

"Wait a minute, how about we play with this game? If it were to be this game, I could probably play as well…… Ah, but, you have to go easy on me."

"There's no choice…… But since Miu-chan insists……"

It really felt like if that continued, senpai would probably do anything if Miu-chan said so.

And Miu-chan seemed to be extremely clear about the situation herself as well, trying to bring Sako-senpai to the seventh heaven.

To a guardian, it just felt like a scene that made people feel extremely uneasy.

A bad woman who plays with countless men in her palm…… No, I must believe that Miu-chan will not turn out like that.

"Oh please! Why do you keep losing?"

"Don't keep saying that, senpai is really quite powerful."

"No excuses! Anyways, you must win! You must definitely win! You must win no matter what!"

The one who was abnormally competitive was Sora-chan.

The reason why it turned out like this was because of an incident that happened when the three sisters were introducing themselves before this.

"I'm the eldest daughter, Takanashi Sora. Thank you for taking care of Onii-chan."

Sora-chan greeted senpai in a cute and polite manner, however—

"Did you just say…… Onii-chan!?"

For some reason, Sako-senpai was particularly sensitive about the term 'Onii-chan'. And he didn't even answer Sora-chan.

"Segawa-kun! Did- did you request this girl to call you 'Onii-chan'!"

"I didn't really request her to…… It just turned out like that naturally……"

"A younger sister not related by blood…… That's— that's so enviable……"

Though I completely had no idea what he was talking about, the term Onii-chan seemed to strike a chord in Sako-senpai, and caused him to be as agitated as when he met Miu-chan.

"You're called Sora-chan, right? How old are you now?"

Sako-senpai questioned with ragged breathing.

To the people passing by, that would be a criminal scene no matter how they looked at it.

"Err…… Fourteen."

"What……"

However, the instant when senpai heard Sora-chan's age, he lost his excitement like suddenly descending temperature.

"What a pity…… If only she was two years younger……"

Senpai shook his head, seemingly in pity.

"Eh? Erm, did I say anything wrong……"

Senpai shifted his gaze away from the troubled Sora-chan, and said shockingly:

"…… Oba-san."

"Wha……!?"

As for the reason that senpai made that rude remark, we couldn't find out as Raika-san took out her paper fan to hit Sako-senpai until he couldn't move, but that was enough to shock everyone present.

And just like that, Sako-senpai completely became an enemy in Sora-chan's eyes.

Disregarding Sora-chan's pride for the moment, it's rather reassuring in a certain aspect that she isn't in Sako-senpai's target range. The problem is, what could I do with the three-year-old Hina?

Judging from the situation, I as their guardian might have to eliminate senpai no matter what.

However, Sako-senpai acted rather gentlemanly, and would not get any closer to Miu-chan than a certain range just like a believer of a goddess, and ran away if Miu-chan or Hina tried to get close instead.

…… If they hugged him, he would probably faint just like that. This is actually quite safe.

"Stop spacing out!"

As I was staring at Sako-senpai, my head was suddenly turned forcibly back to the screen by Sora-chan.

Really, I'm thinking about things that are more important than video games, you know.

And I have to keep an eye on more than just Sako-senpai's actions. After all, Nimura and Raika-san were preparing the soup alone in the kitchen. That concerned me so much that I couldn't focus on the video game……

"Ahhhhhh!"

And as I thought about that, I lost to Sako-senpai once again.

It just felt like Sora-chan was even more agitated about winning or losing than me.

"Enough! Give it here! My turn!"

And Sora-chan even snatched the controller in the end.

That's fine as well, I can go to the kitchen then.

"This time I'll be your opponent! Bespectacled fatty!"

"Oh? Okay…… However, even if you're a girl, I won't go easy on an opponent who had already undergone secondary sexual changes."

"You…… pervert! I must defeat you!"

"Win! Nee-chan win!"

I glanced at Sora-chan and the others' agitated expressions and then poked my head into the kitchen to look at the situation.

On the other side of the door, I wondered how they're cooking.

I glanced inside for a moment, and found that they look like a good match when they cooked together side by side……

"Are you concerned?"

"Yeah, of course I'm con…… Ack, Miu-chan!?"

Miu-chan who slipped out from the video gaming room murmured to me in a low voice that only I could hear.

"Onee-chan is focused on the video game right now, so this is a good chance."

"Miu-chan…… Thank you!"

I thanked Miu-chan who winked to me, as though she was saying 'Leave it to me', and left.

In the kitchen, the two were skillfully preparing dinner. However, since it was just steamboat foodstuff, they just need to cut the vegetables.

"Err…… Is there anything I can help out with?"

After hearing my words, Nimura immediately caught on and smiled.

"Well! Though there's nothing that we particularly need help with, but if you could change shifts with me, I would welcome it very much."

"R- really? Then let's change shifts. Because I just couldn't win against Sako-senpai, Sora-chan was almost furious to death."

"Gotcha."

I took the apron from Nimura's hands.

Nimura leaned over and patted my shoulders, saying quietly: "Take this chance." And switched shifts with me.

"Raika-san, what should I do?"

"Mnn…… Then, tie up the konjac."

"Oh, okay."

While teaching me how to tie them up, Raika-san tied up the konjacs herself.

The konjac were rather slippery, so they were rather hard to handle.

When I finally finished tying them all up, I tried to look for a topic.

"Raika-san, you're really good at making dishes."

"Really? It's just okay."

End of conversation.

Err…… Wait, wait, wait! If I give up so easily, there wouldn't be any progress!

I'm different from when I first entered university.

"Raika-san, if you're free, can you teach me how to cook next time?"

"Me…… teach Yuuta?"

Raika-san asked slightly surprised.

"I'm thinking that learning how to cook is better if I'm going to live together with the kids after this."

Raika-san pondered for awhile, and then……

"Alright. If you're fine with it, I can teach you how to cook."

"R- really!?"

That's great, Raika-san agreed even more directly than I thought, and I could be alone with her just like that.

Of course, wanting to learn some cooking skills for the kids are my sincere thoughts as well.

"Okay, we'll start our first lesson right now."

"Err…… Right now?"

"Of course."

Raika-san started to teach me how to hold the kitchen knife, and the basic way of cutting vegetables.

I really don't know if I should say that senpai was stricter than I thought, or……

"Yuuta, so unskilled."

"Uuu…… Sorry."

Although saying that I have next to no cooking experience is just an excuse, she could be a little more gentle…… Though I almost started to beg for forgiveness, but I still continued my battle. And after a while, I got the feel as well.

"Mnn, much better than before."

"Really?"

It seems that I don't need to suffer Raika-san's cold gaze again.

"Wait a minute! Why are you cooking together!?"

Sora-chan who stood at the entrance shouted as though she saw a terrifying scene.

"No, well….. That's right! I've asked Raika-san to teach me how to cook. I'm thinking that you girls should eat more nutritious food as you're still growing, so……"

For some reason, I explained frantically to Sora-chan.

But I think that my explanation was quite good though I was just winging it.

After I said that, it seemed that Sora-chan had nothing to say as well, and could only glare at me while pouting.

"If that's the case…… I'm learning as well!"

"Eh!?"

How did she form such a conclusion?

However, Sora-chan's expression was quite serious.

"Raika-san, is that okay?"

"It's fine with me. I should say that I welcome it very much."

"Err, wait….. But……"

If that's how it is, my dreamy plan of cooking alone with Raika-san…...

"Stop spacing out! Go away a little!"

As I felt dazed, Sora-chan already put on her apron, inserting herself between us.

"Hey! Don't push!"

"Hmph! That's because you spaced out."

"You two, fighting isn't good."

"Yeah! Raika-san¬ ♪ Ah, how do I make this?"

"This….. You do this."

I unwillingly looked at the silhouette of Raika-san who was teaching Sora-chan in detail, and at this moment, Sora-chan even turned over to smile coldly at me.

Darn…… She came over to meddle when the mood was just right.

Even if it's my cute niece, I won't go down easy like this.

Even in this unusually tense situation, we still completed the preparations for the steamboat.

Raika-san made a simple chicken meatball steamboat.

There were seven of us in total, and we sat around the small coffee table.

"Okay! It's almost done."

After the manager of today's steamboat, Nimura Kouichi-shi who kept gazing at the steamboat sharply, gave his permission, Raika-san immediately opened the cover of the pot. At that instant, steam and a tantalizing fragrance spread throughout the whole house.

"Oh~ It looks quite delicious."

It looks like the first steamboat that we had while living in this flat was worth the wait.

Raika-san started to distribute the food according to age, starting from the youngest.

"Oh! Being able to have food from Oda-senpai, it's my honor."

Nimura said all that flattery naturally while taking the plate.

That seemed to make Raika-san feel somewhat embarrassed as well.

"Next is Yuuta."

"Ah, okay, thank you, senpai."

"That's fine! I'll do Onii-chan's portion!"

Just like that, Sora-chan stopped her once again.

Sora-chan snatched the ladle from Raika-san's hands, and clumsily scooped up chicken meatballs.

"Wait a minute…… Sora-chan, you don't need to……."

"What is it? Do you have anything to say about me distributing the food?"

"No, I don't mean that, it's just that…… Ah! See! That's very dangerous!"

"Uwaa! It's so hot!"

Really, and I said it just a moment ago.

"Isn't that a bit too little? Take a bit more vegetables…… Ah, there's too much soup. And also, add a little rice so that we could eat it with the soup later."

"Ahh! Shut up!"

And finally, only mine was full of vegetables and meatballs.

"Alright, who's next?"

"Me."

Sako-senpai said bluntly.

When Sora-chan extended her hands to ask for the plate from Sako-senpai, he shook his head.

"I want Miu-chan to fill it for me."

"Shut up! Hurry up and give me the plate!"

Senpai's request was immediately denied. The oldest person here who lost to the gaze of a fourteen-year-old girl obtained the stern punishment of only having mushrooms.

"Hina, it's hot, so be careful."

"Mnn~ Okay~"

Hina kept blowing on the chicken meatball on her fork.

On the other hand, Raika-san looked expectantly at Hina blowing.

"Errr…… Do you need me to feed you?"

"No need. Hina can eat without help."

That's great, Hina is so clever.

However, it's really better to accept the others' kind intentions at times like this.

See, Raika-san looked obviously sad.

"Oi-tan, Oi-tan, ahhh—"

"Me?"

"Hina is already a big sister. So Hina can feed Oi-tan."

Hina said proudly.

"I heard that someone even younger than Hina entered the kindergarten today. Hina said that someone else told her so at that time."

"He's called Hiro-kun~"

Oh, I see. Because she knew Hiro-kun who was younger than her, Hina felt that she grew up a bit more?

"Okay, I'll listen to Hina, and let you feed me."

"Mnn!"

Though the chicken meatball that Hina fed me was already cold, it was still quite tasty.

"Okay, me next."

"Nimura-san is so sly~ Me too, me too~"

"No, we have to start from Sora onee-chan this time. Right, Hina?"

"M- me too……"

Oh! Hina is really popular.

"O- okay! Then I'll……"

"Senpai, no."

"Mnn, no."

"Hey! You guys! Why only me!?"

Of course it's because it would feel like a crime if it were to be Sako-senpai.

Just like that, the jolly dinner ended in a flash.

And then, the next morning.

"Bad! Bad! I'm late!"

Early in the morning, Sora-chan's cries rang in the cramped flat.

As we played too much last night, all of us overslept.

"Miu! Let me use the hairdryer!"

"My hair will be done in a moment, wait a minute—"

"I'm telling you not to do your hair anymore, mine hasn't been done yet!"

I only found out after living together with young girls, but the job of tending to one's attire is like some kind of a war to girls. Especially when there were many sisters, there would be battles for hairdryers, the washroom and so on, the seeds of battle are endless.

"Hey, if you don't hurry up, you'll be late for school."

"Onee-chan, hurry up~"

Hina and I who finished ages ago could only wait in vain at the entrance.

"Coming!"

After awhile, Sora-chan seemed to have finished her battle with her bed hair, and we could finally depart.

We arrived at the bus stop in front of my college, and we went on the bus that coincidentally passed by. We swayed on the bus for about thirty minutes, and took another thirty minutes taking the train; Aside from that, coupled with about an hour and a half of walking, that would be the time required for them to go to school.

I feel that it's very hard on Sora-chan and Miu-chan every morning. And the biggest problem in this is sending Hina.

I couldn't fetch Hina home because of my part-time job, so the two of them must take the job of fetching Hina back home from the kindergarten.

And because of that, they couldn't hang out with their friends after school.

Though it's embarrassing for me to say this, but it was a large burden for Sora-chan and Miu-chan.

I really couldn't face the two who never complained because of this.

After they got off the bus, the two sisters left a perfect chorus, and rushed to the ticket booth.

" " We're off~" "

"Be carefuw~"

Hina who waved her sisters away with unclear words, walked towards the kindergarten near the bus stop while holding hands with me.

"Good morning."

As soon as we reached the kindergarten, the familiar Miss Caretaker welcomed us with a broad smile.

"Good morning, Hina-chan!"

"Good morning!"

Hina bowed with a bit too much force.

"Well, I'll leave Hina to you."

"Alright. That's right, Segawa-san, have you read the contact information that I handed you before this?"

"Err…… Ah, I'm sorry."

Whoops, I completely forgot about it. To be frank, I don't even remember where I kept them.

"Really, you should read it as soon as possible. In the papers……"

At the moment the caretaker started to explain after a sigh.

My phone suddenly rang.

An unfamiliar number was on the phone. However, I felt as though I have seen this number previously……

……. Errr, a similar situation seemed to have happened before this as well.

After apologizing to the caretaker, I answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello? Is it Yuuta?"

"O- Oba-san……"

Just like that, I had to face reality once again.

It was a normal afternoon. I welcomed a rare guest to my house.

"Err…… Is green tea okay?"

"Wait a minute."

After looking around the room, Oba-san stopped me as I was about to extend my hands to the teapot, planning to make tea.

"Errr…… Compared with tea, would coffee be better……?"

"What is with your house?"

Oba-san furrowed her brows and said so.

In the house, there were still obvious signs of the scuffle this morning and the steamboat feast yesterday night.

Textbooks tossed around, and pajamas were scattered on the floor. The blankets were just squeezed to a corner of the room as well.

Apart from that, the unwashed cutlery formed a small hill, while the garbage bag that we forgot to take out this morning was stuffed in the cramped kitchen.

"S- sorry. Because we were rather busy yesterday……"

"Being busy is not an excuse. Clean them up immediately!"

"O- okay!"

Just like that, I started to clean up the house before knowing the reason for Oba-san's sudden arrival.

Oba-san helped me to dust the hard to reach locations like the light bulbs, television, bookshelf and so on.

Books were placed onto the bookshelf according to their sizes, and the items placed on the floor

were cleared away.

Aside from that, the creases on the accumulated clothes were flattened after washing them in three turns and were hung on the balcony. The experienced actions felt like they could be in a class on TV.

And even the undergarments of Sora-chan and the others weren't missed.

In this period of time, I washed the cutlery, and moved the rubbish that we cleared away outside, and then washed the bathroom until it sparkled.

Of course, all the work was done under Oba-san's accurate and perfect directions.

Not long after that, a clean three flat house that I almost couldn't recognize appeared before my eyes.

After all of that ended, Oba-san finally sat down before the table.

There was a tense silence.

I suppressed the chilling pressure, and made tea for Oba-san.

"Here……"

I placed the refreshments that I bought just now from a convenience store on a container, then handed it to Oba-san along with the tea.

After thanking me, she started to drink the tea silently.

After awhile, Oba-san started to say:

"The reason that I'm here today is because there's something important that I have to tell you."

To be honest, I almost thought that she was here just to clean up my house, but it seems that she really did have something to say. I didn't speak, and Oba-san took out a piece of paper with something written on it.

"What is this?"

"This is the children's results that I got from Sora-chan and Miu-chan's schools."

"Err……"

That was quite an unexpected answer.

The names of the subjects were listed horizontally, while below them were the marks of their exams.

At the top right corner of the paper, the name 'Takanashi Sora' was written on it.

"These are the grades of her first semester, while this seems to be one from a recent test."

After hearing Oba-san say that, I compared the grades of the two lists.

Sora-chan's results dropped quite a lot.

Her results that were quite good fell to an average level.

"Not only her grades. It seems that the frequency of her being late and being sleepy in class has increased as well."

"How can this……"

I never knew.

The changing of a lifestyle could actually have such a large impact…… However, that's quite understandable. After all, Sora-chan just went to a school near to her original house before this…… While I, myself, was already crowned the king of skipping classes, asking people to go for roll call in my stead, and still getting sleepy in class.

"And also this, I found this while cleaning up your house."

"This is…… 'Parents' Guide for Open Day'?"

That was an introduction for the open day at Hina's kindergarten.

"The schools and kindergartens would always send a lot of contact documents. Ascertaining all of them is a guardian's obligatory task."

After that, Oba-san said a lot of things that I did not know yet again.

For instance, Sora-chan left the club that she was in. On the other hand, Miu-chan had an anemia attack during a P.E class recently.

I had no idea about any of this at all.

"How can this be…… Why didn't they tell this to me?"

"It's not that they didn't tell you. Isn't it more like they can't tell you?"

"Eh……?"

"Even if they let you know, that would only make you troubled…… When they think about it like that, they probably can't bear to tell you about it."

…… That might really be true. No, that's probably the whole truth.

The kids are probably grateful to me…… They certainly would not want to increase my burden. Blast…… I really feel ashamed.

"Letting the people that you're caring for worry about you, that's quite negligent for a guardian."

Oba-san said mercilessly. Not knowing, I can't help it because of business, the reality that exposed all of my excuses were laid bare in front of me.

I couldn't say anything.

The legitimacy that Oba-san spoke of was of course a reason, but the thing that shocked me more was that the children had so many worries about me, and kept tolerating all of these things.

Just like that, I hung my head in shame and remorse, while Oba-san took out what looked like a letter and placed it on the table.

"And this is……?"

"Among them is the contact information of the Takanashi family. And besides that, ways of contacting youth centres opened by my friend are written on it as well."

"Y….. Youth centre!?"

"The result of our discussion is, it seems like there is a way to let the kids stay together during the period of their mandatory education. But after high school, there would be no way."

The expression that Oba-san had that moment was the gentlest that I had seen.

"No matter if it's me or the people from the Takanashi family, to be frank, we thought that you would give up immediately. However, you hung on for two months already. Everyone thanks you a lot, and I believe that the children thank you as well. So now, you probably don't need to act on impulse anymore, right?"

I understood that Oba-san was choosing her words carefully, trying to convince me.

"You, yourself, are still a nineteen-year-old child as well. Of course, I'm not saying that people who become parents and do their duty raising their children don't exist. However, this isn't a simple matter. In these two months, have you bought new clothes for the children, disregarding the clothes that Yuri-san bought for them?"

…… With my financial capability, at most, I could only buy undergarments, and also clothes at shops that are famous for their cheapness.

"To raise a child, the environment is very important. So listen to me, you did enough already.

And because of your efforts, we finally found a place that is willing to take the three sisters under their wings."

I really could tell that Oba-san spoke very carefully to avoid repeating the mistake she made last time.

While I…… Still could not stand up from the blow.

Sora-chan left her club…… Miu-chan who always smiled had an anemia attack……

How useless am I, as a guardian?

I really can't face onee-san. And of course, Shingo-san as well.

…… Am I really that useless?

That was the first time. Those words flashed in my mind for the first time.

No matter how hard I increased my part-time jobs, or learned to cook…… With my abilities, can I really not become a pillar of support for the children? The various incidents that I went through during the past two months replayed in my heart.

Ah……

I finally found out at that time.

So I was the one who was relying on them. I couldn't imagine a life without the kids.

If the kids weren't here…… Facing the fact that onee-san is not here anymore, the fact that I am now all alone, and I am the person who truly can't accept this, I might be the one in the wrong.

When I think about it, I didn't even have the time to feel sorrow. After all, I was busy all this time, and there was a lot of trouble every day.

If things weren't like that…… How would I turn out to be?

Could I, who lost my one and only relative, continue to be so energetic like I am now?

As I felt dazed because of this, Oba-san continued to lash out.

"…… Here, I'll give this to you now."

The thing that Oba-san took out was a pile of documents, and an insurance certification with my name on it was among them as well.

"Yuri-san's insurance, and part of the compensation money for the air crash. They're for you."

"These…… These things shouldn't be mine, and should be given to Hina and the others……"

"There's another portion for Hina and the others. The insurance money for their parents and their inheritance are quite a lot, and the compensation money for the incident was quite a considerable amount as well, so you don't need to worry. This is your portion. This is the insurance that Yuri-san handed to me to keep as a safeguard since her single days in case anything happened to her."

After saying that, Oba-san took out a handkerchief to pat on the corner of her eyes.

"Therefore, you should just find a way to make yourself happy. I believe that Yuri-san is worried about the kids, but she wouldn't wish for you to sacrifice yourself because of this."

Sacrifice…… I think that this way of describing it is a huge mistake.

"In any case, taking them under your wing and being their guardian while you're not of age is impossible……"

Though Oba-san tried to continue explaining, my heart no longer responded.

So things are like this? So parents need to do things to this extent? And onee-chan even thought of the scenario when she wasn't here, even now she was caring for me……

I'm really, so pathetic right now. I might…… Not even have that right.

The only thing that I could do at that time was to tell Oba-san to let me sort my thoughts out.

That day was the first time I bought canned beer in my whole life. It only had a bitter taste, so I have no idea how this thing was tasty. I couldn't even hide my drunken state, and went home just like that.

"I'm back~"

"Welcome home~ We bought dinner already."

It was Sora-chan, Miu-chan and Hina who were reading a picture book.

The scene that gradually became mundane to me…… I might not be able to see it any longer.

I hugged Miu-chan and Hina from behind.

"Ah! You stink of beer! Oji-san, are you drunk?"

"Uu~ Probably. Though there are just a few months left, I'm still not of age after all, so don't tell

other people……"

"Oi-tan, so heavy. Let- me- go~"

Seeing Hina struggling while happily pushing on my arms, I tightened my clutch.

At that moment, I suddenly noticed the bunny doll by my side.

"Hina, it seems that you're always having the bunny doll by your side recently."

"Yeah!"

Hina hugged the bunny doll, it looked like she cherished it very much.

"This doll, Mama gave it to me!"

…… Onee-san, she……

"About this bunny-san, Mama said that if I treasure it very very much, it can help me to make my wishes come true! So, Hina found it when we went to our last home! Because Hina has a wish!"

After saying that, Hina pressed the doll to her face as though she wanted to speak to it.

"Listen to Hina, I wish that Papa and Mama will come back soon! Hear that? Bunny-san!"

Hina's naive words resounded in the small room, causing the atmosphere to thicken.

"……"

"…… Uuu!"

Sora-chan and Miu-chan lowered their heads at the same time.

The two months until now. Not one of us mentioned Papa, Mama or Onee-san.

We were all running away from the truth, and also…… They probably cry about this when they're alone.

I…… I haven't cried yet. At least, I hope that I will not cry yet right now.

"…… Yeah, it's great if we can see them soon."

Though I couldn't say that they would come back, I still squeezed out a smile, and said to Hina.

"Mnn!"

Seeing the broad smile on Hina's face, I couldn't help but hug her yet again.

Because Hina's smile was the spitting image of Onee-san who kept encouraging me.

"Alright! Then, so that you wouldn't get scolded by Mama, you should brush your teeth and go to sleep!"

"'Kay!"

I brought Hina to the washroom and closed the door.

It seemed that weak sobs came from the other side of the door.

…… I really gave them a lot of grief.

That night, I could not close my eyes at all.

Chapter 6 - Parents' Day for Everyone

Once again, time fleeted by without me deciding anything.

Not only did I not discuss the matter with Sora-chan and the rest, I had not even looked through the documents I received from my aunt.

What came over me that day to have brought the kids from Nee-san's house? I thought as I lost confidence in myself.

However, neither could I imagine letting go of those kids who were precious to me.

Even though I knew that all this was just willfulness on my part.

I sent Hina to the nursery, and returned to my apartment without going to the university.

As always, upon returning, I cleaned up what remained of the breakfast that Miu-chan had prepared for us, then stared at the itinerary guide for parents' day.

"The day after tomorrow huh....."

On parents' day, the parents of other nursery children would probably be attending.

Hina was still waiting for her Dad and Mom.

If the parents of other kids do come, she would definitely ask about her parents if she didn't see them. What should I say to her then.....?

It wasn't like we hadn't told Hina about her parents' death a few times. She probably understood that her parents wouldn't be coming back, and was bearing with it in her own way.

But even so, it didn't mean that she understood the fact that her Dad and Mom no longer existed in this world.

"I should just take a leave of absence the day after tomorrow."

That way, I could at least dissolve her loneliness.

Probably..... no, that was definitely the best way.

When I came back from my part-time job, Hina, who was more cheerful than usual, came out to greet me.

"Oi-tan, welcome back!"

"Orrh, Hina, you are still awake huh?"

I carried my niece who came flying into my arms and walked up to my apartment's entrance.

"You know you know, Mr Rabbit is so great! Papa and Mama are com'in!"

"Eh....."

For an instant, I was at a loss for words.

Sora-chan and Miu-chan's faces also became complicated.

"Hina..... what do you mean by that?"

"Well, well, it's cos of visit'in day. On visit'in day, Papa and Mama are com'in to the nursery to see Hina parform. Hina is really good!"

Hina talked rapidly from her excitement.

"Do you know about the parents' visiting day at the nursery the day after tomorrow?"

Upon saying that, Sora-chan showed me the itinerary guide for visiting day.

"Well..... I'm sorry, I was focused on other things and I only realized it recently."

I couldn't tell her that it was really thanks to Oba-san cleaning up for me that I realized that. Since I might have to tell her about the rest of our conversation if I did that. I passed Hina to Miu-chan and sat down.

"What should we do? Hina is really looking forward to that."

"Aah....."

Hina merrily rehearsed the performance she was going to do on that day while saying, "I'll show this to Papa and Mama". It had been a long time since I last saw such a happy Hina.

"Alright. I'll explain it to her..... Hina, Hina!"

"Oi-tan, what's up?"

"I have something important to tell you."

Hina cocked her head as she trot up to me and sat down.

"You know, Papa and Mama won't be able to come on visiting day."

"..... Why? Both Sensei and Hiro-kun said they will, you know?"

"I'm sorry Hina, Papa and Mama won't be able to make it no matter what."

"Why, why!?"

"Well..... that's because Papa and Mama are in a very far, far place."

"Far, far place? Papa and Mama can't come back? Then, Hina will go! I'll go to Papa and Mama! Uwu, sob..... uwu, uwaa~h."

Hina hugged her rabbit plushy and started wailing. This was the first time I saw her cry like that.

I felt a tightness growing in my chest.

But still, right now, I was the stand-in father for this child. I couldn't pass this role to Sora-chan and Miu-chan, who were looking at us with eyes that had turned red.

"That's not possible. It's really a very faraway place..... not just Hina, but even me, Sora-Neechan and Miu-Neechan can't reach it as well."

"Fuweh..... sob..... Papa..... Mama....."

"..... It'll be fine, you'll see them one day. Can you bear with it?"

Hina didn't stop crying. As if she was seeking help, she ran back to her sisters.

Sora-chan and Miu-chan embraced her gently.

She had probably been holding it all in this whole time.

Children may be more sensitive than we think.

Perhaps, as a consequence of us intentionally not thinking about Nee-san, that child might have picked it up and never asked us about it all this time.

After sobbing in Sora-chan's bosom for a long time, Hina finally tired herself out and fell asleep, and by then it was already late into the night.

"I was thinking of having her take a leave of absence on visiting day."

I began after Hina had calmed down.

"Yeah..... it'll be heartbreaking for her to see the parents of other kids coming to watch them."

Miu-chan agreed immediately. But Sora-chan just kept quiet.

"..... Is that really okay?"

After hearing Sora-chan's murmur, I rebuked.

"Then, what should we do?"

"I don't know but..... say, if I was absent from school....."

"No way. You've already been absent a lot..... taking on household chores and fetching Hina is already a big burden on you. I don't want to place any more burdens on the two of you."

I didn't want to fail any further as a guardian. Perhaps, she might have realized how I felt, because she turned away angrily.

"No, it's not! It's not a burden at all!"

Sora-chan retorted with her cute face beet red. But.....

"You resigned from your club activities, right?"

"How..... how did you know....."

"Not just that, your grades have also dropped. And Miu-chan as well, you collapsed the other day because of anemia, right? I can't place any more burdens on you girls."

My knowledge about these seemed to be outside of their expectations, for their gazes started shifting guiltily.

"But..... it can't be helped, right. We are family, right! I don't see it as any burden!"

"I understand how you feel but....."

But still, Sora-chan did not seem willing to relent.

"Enough of that, I will go to Hina's visiting day. I'll send Hina to the nursery!"

"Hey, Sora-chan!"

With that, Sora-chan covered herself up in her futon and went to sleep.

Miu-chan looked at her elder sister in resignation, and before long, as if she has given up, she glanced at me and lay down as well. I was certain none of us slept well that night.

And so, the following morning, we went to our respective schools without talking much to one another.

"Hina, be good."

"Uhn....."

I parted ways with Hina at the entrance to the nursery as usual. After what had happened yesterday, Hina was in extremely low spirits. But still, she insisted on going to the nursery.

"Oi-tan."

"Hn? What is it?"

"If I'm good, will Papa and Mama come.....?"

"Well....."

I was troubled about what to say.

"They might just come."

After hesitating for a while, I replied in a terribly irresponsible manner.

"Look, go say hello to your friends."

"Uhn!"

Hina ran into the nursery.

"Er..... Segawa-san, what do you intend to do about tomorrow's visiting day?"

The nursery worker asked me in a concerned tone.

"I wanted her to take a leave of absence, but she wants to come....."

"I see. But..... it's not uncommon for some parents to be unable to come. We'll carry Hina-chan around throughout so don't worry about it."

Looking at the encouraging, cheerful smile of the nursery worker whom I was well acquainted with only made me feel a pain in my heart.

I went straight to university from the nursery.

It was halfway through the second period, and as such, the number of people on the campus was sparse.

As for me, I skipped my own first period and went to the cafeteria to enjoy my teatime leisurely..... there's no way that could happen, the truth was that I was waiting for someone.

"Sorry for the wait."

The ones who came were Nimura and Raika-san. I contacted them via mail in the morning. And told them that there was something I wanted their advice on. After explaining the situation, I took a breath, then took a sip from my sweet canned coffee.

Even though it might be a little cheap as a consultation fee, but, Nimura and Raika-san both held similar beverages.

"..... That's the situation."

I told them about the nursery's parents' visiting day and what my aunt had told me.

As I told them everything unreservedly, they could only nod quietly as they waited for me to finish.

Just from that alone, I calmed down a lot. Even though nothing was resolved, it was a miraculous feeling, I thought. Nimura started to poke fun at me.

"I have a good idea. Yuuta should just take Sora-chan as his wife and she can be Hina-chan's mother....."

"Dummy."

Remaining expressionless, Raika-san slapped her harisen onto Nimura.

"It's really a difficult thing. Hina still doesn't understand about death."

It was difficult for us as well. When I muttered that, Raika-san looked at me straight in the eye.

"I think Yuuta did really well."

Raika-san said it a bland but clear manner.

"But I also understand what Oba-san is saying. It's difficult."

Raika-san cocked her head slightly. Nimura folded his arms as well.

"It might be easy for me to say things as an outsider, but I really love those kids. I can't help you much in the money department, but I can at least participate in fetching Hina from the nursery. Or if you like, I can also help in preparing dinner, like on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so how about having me do that?"

Even though he had a handsome face and a frivolous smile..... it was exactly because he would definitely do what I asked that made me feel troubled. Since I didn't attend many lectures, he was always the one who answered the roll call on my behalf. And because of that, the frequency

of him coming over to our place had reduced a lot.

"Instead of helping you, this is more of a reward to me. I'd like to take care of Hina."

"Then, Oda-senpai, why don't you get married with Yuuta and become the mother of the three sisters?"

"..... I see."

Hey! Nimura is being Nimura, but Raika-san, please don't think about that so seriously.

While the topic seemed to be heading into a favorable direction for me, this was not the time to think about that.

"For now, at present, as their guardian..... what do you think I should do?"

I asked my two trusted comrades.

Silence ensued for a while.

Should I really do what Oba-san told me to? Or is there another way out?

The two of them exchanged looks..... and looked at me.

"..... Don't you want to see Hina's performance?"

Raika-san's words hit me hard.

She was right. I totally forgot about it. Such an obvious, important thing.

I did want to see Hina's performance.

This was not a problem about my stand, situation or what would happen from here.

I definitely couldn't miss the performance of the cutest niece in the universe.

"Er..... can I get your help?"

The both of them nodded without any hesitation.

After parting with Yuuta and Hina, Sora and Miu rode the train, and upon exiting the ticket barrier, started off in the opposite direction from their schools.

They were heading towards a detached house inside the city area. The house in which they had previously lived in.

In a familiar fashion, Sora retrieved a hidden duplicate key and opened the door.

Then, she headed straight to a room on the second floor.

That was a room which she definitely wouldn't enter the last time they came.

It was Yuri-san's room.

Upon opening the door, she could still smell the scent of Yuri-san.

She suppressed the tears that welled up from that and opened Yuri-san's tansu.

"..... I'm sorry, Yuri-san."

"Onee-chan, are you really going to do it?"

Miu-chan, who was following behind, said to her big sister who was engrossed in rummaging the contents of the tansu.

"Obviously. Hina is our precious little sister."

"Yeah but....."

Miu-chan knew very well that once her stubborn big sister had decided on something, it would be difficult to change it.

But still, she couldn't help but say something as she watched her obstinate figure.

"Found it!"

Upon finding the object of her search at last, Sora lifted it up happily.

Even to the eyes of Miu-chan who loves her big sister very much, it was something she thought was unreasonable..... but Sora was not the type who would yield even a single step.

The next morning, when I woke up, Sora-chan and the rest were nowhere in sight.

It seemed like she had already brought Hina to the nursery.

But..... for things to turn out as such, Sora-chan sure is an obstinate one.

Yesterday, even after saying many times that it was fine and she should go to school.....

Miu-chan left a note together with toast for my breakfast.

"'There's salad in the fridge' huh....."

Just as written, there was a salad wrapped up in film in the fridge.

Well, seeing a bowl of lettuce cut into fine pieces violently, on top which an entire can of tuna appeared to be emptied, made me wonder whether that could be called a salad but..... wait a minute, perhaps this is what Miu-chan likes?

Anyway, I downed the burnt toast and salad as a light meal and headed for the university.

Right in the middle of the first period, the campus was devoid of people.

Around this time, Hina should have already reached the nursery.

Parents' day was in another hour and thirty minutes.

I hastened to the "Road Research" where Raika-san and Nimura were supposed to wait.

The two of them were already waiting there.

"..... You've come, Yuuta."

"Fufufu, seems like you've made up your resolve."

Even though it seemed like they were part of a secret, evil organization speaking to an innocent passerby who had stumbled into their lair, I nodded firmly at them.

Since today, I was the father of Hina.

Takanashi Sora was so nervous right now that she could just collapse.

She could feel the gazes from around her, her legs quibbled, and the palms of her hands were full of sweat.

Frankly, she was never this nervous even during competitions of her club activity.

There were a number of reasons for that.

For example, even though she was already aware of it, Yuri-san's suit was too large for her.

The makeup she had put on for the first time did not suit her at all.

The high heels she was wearing to make her look taller were loose fitting, and if she was not careful, she might just fall over herself.

However, much more than that, Sora was nervous about the performance of her precious little sister.

To perform her dance that she had practiced so much in front of so many parents, will she be able to do it well? Or will she fumble and cry?

If she were to fumble and cry, Sora might not be able to stand it and end up running towards her.

And will the absence of her parents make Hina feel dejected?

Sora's chest was filled with anxiety.

She might have been too adamant in making the reluctant Miu go to school, thinking that she would be alright on her own.

I seem to be standing out a lot.

"Now everyone, let's dance to the beat of the music. Show your best to your fathers and mothers, alright?"

At the nursery worker's urging, the children who were wearing star-decorated costumes bustled onto the stage.

The parents surrounding Sora started to cheer and applaud.

Mothers shouted the names of their children and fathers clicked on the shutters of their cameras.

Sora seemed to be able to see the figures of her parents among them.

Just months ago, that would have been a natural thing.

She had always thought that the lively, cheerful Yuri-san, despite not being her real mother, and her clumsy but kind father whom she loved dearly, would always be around her forever.

But Hina only had three years with them. I, who can still remember my father and mother, have to get my act together. Those feelings were the only things holding Sora up.

But, in this noisy, boisterous place, she felt that it just made her loneliness more pronounced.

"It really feels terrible to be alone....."

Unable to withstand the pain of her parents' death that was brought back after all this while, Sora shut her eyes tightly.

"Now, brace yourself, Sora-chan."

At that time, she heard someone's voice.

At the same time, a large, warm hand stroked Sora's head.

When she looked up, it was as if she was looking at her father.

As I arrived late, all the mothers turned their gazes to me.

Wearing a suit that I wasn't used to wearing, and having my hair properly set with wax and mousse, I felt kind of uneasy.

However, the strange gazes I received were less than what I expected. Well, I was probably just a rarely seen young father to them.

Or perhaps, it was thanks to Raika-san's efforts. The suit was borrowed from Nimura.

"Now everyone, let's dance to the beat of the music. Go."

Following that, Hina and the rest of the children appeared on the stage one by one.

Hina..... was there. She was right at the front and started swinging her body to the music.

Is she nervous? Her expression seems stiff.

Alright, now is the time I should start calling out like the rest of the parents.....

Just as I was about to inhale in preparation for that, a female wearing familiar clothes came into my view.

..... Huh, is that Yuri-Neesan?

Without thinking, I closed in on that lady who was wearing clothing that I was familiar with.

"Sora-chan.....!?"

Wait a minute, why is she dressed up like that?

Upon closer inspection, her clothes were downright familiar to me.

It was a suit that Nee-san had worn when she came to my university entrance ceremony.

It seemed to be too large for Sora's small body, her sleeves were loose, and the tight miniskirt now seemed like a half-baked long skirt.

Her unsuitable makeup halved her original cuteness but..... her feelings reached me.

She was trying her best to dress smartly for Hina's sake, to stand in for her mother.

"That fool....."

Perhaps, due to nervousness, she was trembling with her eyes shut, and I walked closer to her.

"Now, brace yourself, Sora-chan."

I stroked her head briskly.

"Eh..... ah, w-why?"

"Because our cute Hina is performing."

I threw a smile to Sora-chan, who was slightly confused.

"Now. Look at the stage. We are Hina's family. There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"U-Uhn....."

"Oh my, oh my, Oji-san, you really came too."

All of a sudden, Miu-chan's face poked out from my side.

"Miu-chan!?"

Her sudden appearance surprised me but what really drew my attention were her clothes.

Miu-chan, who was clad in what could be called lolita fashion, was radiating an aura of a model or idol. That flashy attire made her stand out even more than the children.....

"Miu! What's with those clothes!?"

"Jeez, when I think about how Onee-chan is going to look pretty all by herself, I went to ask Senpai a favor, to prepare the most eye-catching, cutest dress for me."

"Senpai you said, don't tell me..... it's my club president!?"

Why does that guy have these kinds of clothes.....

"In the end, all of us came."

"Yeah. I just hope that Hina will be pleased about it."

"She will."

Hina who was dancing on the stage noticed us.

"Hina! Do your best!"

Her face became surprised for an instant.

As if she was perplexed, as if she was troubled. It was clear that she would never have thought that I would appear dressed like her Papa and Sora would come in her Mama's clothes. Even though we were neither her father nor mother.....

At that time, I took out something which I had brought out from home.

It was the rabbit plushy.

It was something Nee-san bought for Hina. This was a symbol that signified "Everything will be alright".

Seeing me with the rabbit plushy, Hina became all smiley and waved her hand.

I got through to her. Matching to the beat of the cheery music, she started dancing with a more serious expression than anyone else.

We were watching Hina's performance.

You might say that I was biased, but she was better than any other of the kids and much cuter than them.

After the performance came to a close, all the kids rushed up to their families.

Hina ran up to us as well.

"Oi-tan, Hina, Hina tried really hard!"

I carried the small body of Hina that had the fragrance of the sun, and rubbed cheeks with her.

"That was awesome..... Hina, you are the best..... no, you are the world's number one."

ABC

Reveling in Hina's performance, I was so moved that I quivered.

"Oji-san, you are exaggerating too much."

"It's embarrassing so don't talk in such a loud voice. There are parents of other kids here too."

The two of them looked at me in amazement.

"Don't worry about it. Since I'm Hina's Papa for today."

"Papa?"

Just when the two of them cocked their heads questioningly,

"Alright everyone, wash your hands and eat your bento. Today, you'll be with your guardians."

""Yes.""

As the nursery worker gave the instruction, all the children replied in unison.

In a perfect line --- well, not really but, the children followed closely behind the nursery worker like ducklings following a mother duck to the washing area.

"Huh? Bento?"

We exchanged looks with one another involuntarily.

"Wh-What should we do!? I didn't prepare that."

"We were too preoccupied just by preparing our clothes....."

"Aaaahh!? I-If we leave it like this, then our cute Hina will be the only one to feel lonely!"

"The only thing we can do is to quickly go get one from the convenience store or a bento shop....."

"If we get one from the convenience store, it will just make her look even more pitiful!"

"Erm, Hina-chan didn't bring her bento today? It was written in the printout though."

As a small panic aroused among us, the nursery worker who always received Hina at the entrance in the morning asked us in a concerned manner.

How pathetic. We messed up at the most critical part.....

At that moment, the atmosphere in the classroom changed.

Something seemed to have caused a stir in the room.

The parents who were gathered had all turned towards the same direction.

There.... was a tall, slender incredible beauty that anyone would mistake for a model.

On top of that, her suit was gorgeous, and furthermore, she was wearing sunglasses and carrying a large multi-tiered food box.

That lady saw us, and headed straight to where we were.

W-What's happening?

The lady reached us, and standing before me, her shoulders suddenly drooped.

"..... I'm in shock. I didn't make it."

"W-Who are you?"

Upon asking, the lady calmly made jabbed at me.

"You are so cruel to forget my face."

"Ah..... aaah!? Ra-Raika-san!?"

I was surprised. Raika-san, who usually hardly puts on any makeup, was wearing makeup perfectly and on top of that, wore a suit.

"Wait, Raika-san, why are you here?"

"..... I'm here to stand in for the mother. Seems like it's unnecessary."

Raika-san said as she looked at Sora-chan.

As if she were embarrassed at her baggy clothes, Sora-chan waved her hands in denial.

"E-Er, this is just....."

"..... So cute. Yuuta, just as I thought, you should give her to me."

Raika-san said as she hugged Sora-chan with one hand.

No matter how many times you ask, I won't give them to you.

"Ah, Raika-san, that is....."

The practical Miu-chan pointed at the multi-tiered food box that Raika-san was holding.

"Aah, it's our bento. I made it together with Nimura. Because of this, I'm late."

Upon saying that, she handed the heavy looking food box to Miu-chan.

"Uwaaah..... Onee-tan, thank you!"

Hina's eyes were sparkling. Raika-san's face turned beet red.

"Eh..... wh-why?"

How did Raika-san know about the bento?

"Because I saw this."

In Raika-san's hand, aside from the bento, was the itinerary guide for visiting day.

"Nimura-kun was the one who noticed it. He is sleeping now, tired from all the preparations since yesterday."

"T-Thank you so much!"

Nimura, I'll definitely treat you to Häagen-Dazs tomorrow.

I was truly grateful to Raika-san and Nimura's thoughtfulness from the bottom of my heart.

After that, we ate our bento together with Hina at the sports ground of the nursery.

Hina, Sora-chan, Miu-chan, Raika-san and me.

As we were the only ones who came to visiting day in such a huge group, we stood out a lot, and some of the parents looked at us curiously from time to time.

But we were not in the least bit bothered by that.

"Oi-tan, why are you wearing those western-style clothes?"

"Eh? They don't suit me? Well I thought so..... I borrowed these from Nimura though, it seems a little flashy, or should I say too stylish....."

"No way. Oji-san, you look really cool."

"R-Really? Am I really cool?"

That's great. I feel a little more confident now.

"It's not that Onii-chan's cool, but Raika-san's dressing up skills are good, isn't it?"

I lost confidence again.

Sora-chan, you are so cruel. You could have praised me a little at least.....

"Oi-tan, you're cool!"

"O-Orrhh, Hina! You are a good kid for being honest!"

I carried Hina and hugged her.

As usual, the sensation of hugging Hina was extraordinary, and she was also very warm.

What is this feeling.....

I couldn't help but just pour my love into Hina.

Right now, I kind of understood why Nee-san wanted me to form a family quickly.

Nee-san who went through so much hardship just to bring me up.

And she had finally found her happiness, but yet.....

She can no longer hug her beloved daughter ever again, what an unreasonable thing this is.

But, I..... can still embrace these kids with my hands.

I don't want to let them go. I don't want to let them go.

"Oi-tan it hurts."

Before I knew it, I was shedding tears.

On top of that, it seemed like I was hugging Hina too hard.

"I'm sorry. But, I think that if it's your Papa or Mama, they would do the same."

"Papa.....?"

Hina thought for a while, then she broke into a dazzling smile.

"Then, today it's not Oi-tan but Papa, right!"

Upon saying that, Hina returned the hug.

"If you are Hina's Papa, then you are also our Papa."

Miu-chan came over to hug us as well.

Some tears had welled up in the eyes of that sweet-smelling girl.

Raika-san who was watching us, gave a push to Sora-chan's back.

"There are some crybabies over there. Why don't you go comfort them?"

Raika-san, you are good.....

After hesitating for a while, Sora-chan came up to us.

"Papa huh..... well, only for today."

Upon saying that, she fearfully, hesitatingly hugged us.

I used all my strength and embraced all three of them together.

Before we knew it, even Hina, Sora-chan, and Miu-chan were crying.

With smiling faces, tears and mucus streamed down our face.

"..... My. There are other families around as well, so shape up."

A person called out to us while we were still embracing one another.

"..... Eh?"

It was my aunt.

She was dressed up in a suit..... her makeup ruined by tears rolling down.

"Oba-san..... why."

"Why, you say, obviously I'm here to watch Hina-san's performance! In the first place, what are you all doing here when you should be at your own respective schools!"

I was confused as to whether Oba-san was angry, smiling or crying.

When I spotted the bento she was carrying, it seemed like she had also put in a lot of effort into it.

"It's not just me here, you know."

Following my aunt's gaze, I saw a petty official resembling Shingo-san's elder brother, and a few of their relatives. Everyone came huh.....

Sora-chan and the rest also noticed it.

"Oji-san....."

"Sora..... please forgive us. Your Oji-sans....."

"No, don't worry about it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being willful."

Sora-chan clung to me tightly while she said that.

"..... It's fine. I don't think anyone will separate you all anymore."

Oba-san stroked Sora-chan's back gently.

"After witnessing this, no one will snatch your family away from you anymore."

Even though they had no clue on what was happening, warm gazes from the parents around us fell on us.

This was probably a natural thing.

As family, we will continue living together.

In the strengthening autumn wind, I became the father of these three sisters.

That was really a very, very proud moment for me.

Epilogue

"I'm back—!"

Hina shouted the very instant she stepped through the door.

Hina's bright voice that felt as though it was a long time since we last heard it, it was filled with vigor, and was like a lit light, filling the spacious house with dazzling energy in a flash.

We arrived at the house Nee-chan and Shingo-san left us. From today on, the four of us are going to start our new lives right here.

A few days after Parents' Day, Oba-san visited me with Shingo-san's brother this time.

As I thought they were going to discuss the matter about the three sisters with me, I faced them with an uncompromising resolve.

However, I couldn't believe the first words that Oba-san said.

"Here are the documents and the keys, they're owned by Sora-chan as the eldest daughter in name."

"Eh……?"

"Having four people live in this small flat causes a lot of trouble, does it not? And besides, the children will grow up as well, so more complicated problems would arise. Sleeping together with you as a man is inappropriate for their education as well."

"Err…… Oba-san, I'm not really clear about the situation right now……"

After hearing me say that, Oba-san sighed forcefully.

"You have to move into their house. I handled all the procedures and the like."

"Eh—!?"

Shingo-san's brother continued after nodding:

"I can give in a hundred steps and let you take care of the children, but I cannot tolerate you sleeping together in a room! Shingo would have the same thoughts as well!"

After he said that, he fished out a portable shoehorn, looking at me as though he was holding a dagger.

…… This guy is truly Shingo-san's relative.

However, it was a completely unexpected suggestion.

"Moving would mean…… Asking me to move into the house that Nee-san lived in?"

Oba-san nodded silently after sipping a mouthful of tea.

Actually, Oba-san did a lot of negotiation with the Takanashi family for us during the time that the three sisters stayed here. The life insurance that Nee-san and Shingo-san left the three sisters, the accident insurance, and the compensation for the family of the people involved in the accident and so on, all of those procedures were handled by Oba-san.

Those were the best solutions for whoever accepted the responsibility of taking in the three sisters.

Though I didn't know it before this, I found out that Oba-san seemed to have once been an experienced staff of an insurance company.

Though there seemed to have been some problems, Oba-san unknowingly finished most of the procedures before the Takanashi family changed their minds about the safeguards and how much money to give the three sisters from their inheritance.

"When you reach twenty, you can officially become the guardian of the children by law, but at this stage, your official guardian is me; while the official guardian of the three sisters is Nobuyoshi-san."

"That's how things are. This means that as long as I am willing to, I can bring Sora-chan and the others away at any time."

So this person who looks like a civil service worker is called Nobuyoshi-san?

"However, in the family meeting, everyone wishes for the three sisters to live together. And because of this, though I am not willing to, I will give consent that you can live together with them as their guardian. But you have to stay in the house the children grew up in."

Which means, that house officially became the three sisters' home.

To be honest, I, who thought that Oba-san was just a stubborn and fussy old dame, must reflect on myself.

I think that it's probably because these people sincerely planned this for me, that their words were so stern.

Actually, I think that it's a great suggestion. Just like that, I only need to use more time to go to school, and I don't need to pay the house rent as well.

"However, I will check on your living conditions each month. If there are any problems, I will arrange another place to take in the children."

"That's right, if you let the children have a miserable life, we will take over mercilessly."

…… They're really quite stern.

After telling me some necessary matters, Oba-san drank the leftover tea in her cup, and prepared to leave.

"Ah, erm…… Thank you very much!"

I lowered my head and expressed my greatest gratitude to Oba-san who was standing at the entrance.

"Before this…… When your parents passed away…… It should have been me who had to take care of Yuri-san and you."

After hesitating for a moment, Oba-san said that.

"But that time, my husband just passed away as well…… To be frank, I had no leftover energy to take care of you two. Yuri-san probably realized this, so she told me: 'I'll take care of my brother!'."

"Nee-san, she……?"

I never knew about that. Oba-san originally wanted to take us in……

"Yuri-san never shed even one tear in front of the others, and kept trying and trying…… Just like that, she sent you to college…… Your sister is an admirable person. Why would a person like that encounter such an accident…… She even gave birth to a child, and should be able to enjoy happiness."

Oba-san did not cry. However, her gaze was full of sorrow.

"By the way, the two of you are really similar to each other."

Oba-san showed a rare smile, and finally said: "Good luck to you.", and left.

"…… My younger brother as well. He should have been able to attain happiness after truly marrying a good wife."

It was only at that moment that Shingo-san's brother shed some tears in front of me.

"That's right. We handled all the matters about the law. Though it's just an empty coffin…… If you're free, try to find some time to visit the grave."

After he said that, he handed me a map that marked the location of the grave, then left the house.

That night, I had a dream.

In the depths of Africa, at a remote area with some distance from the place where the plane crashed, Nee-san and Shingo-san chatted happily. They were together with the natives, and were dancing together while wearing what looked like straw dresses.

After they jumped with a parachute, it seemed like they were taken in by natives who did not have any contact with the modern world.

Compared to the timid Shingo-san, Nee-san became the focus of the crowd very quickly.

It seemed that that they were living quite well there.

When Shingo-san worried for the three sisters, Nee-san would kiss him, telling him to relax.

Of course, being worried about the daughters is a good thing, but……

Because Yuuta is there, there wouldn't be any problem.

I saw Nee-san smiling while saying that.

I opened my eyes, and I couldn't help but smile.

I feel that the scene in the dream might really have happened.

I picked up the map with the grave marked on it and threw it into the rubbish bin after scrunching it into a ball.

Nobody is lying in there anyway.

To me, Nee-san is my only relative, and is also an existence that is more important than anyone.

And that was also the reason that I was envious like a child for a while after Nee-san married.

But when my important Nee-san passed away, not only did I not give up on myself, I almost never cried. Most of that was because Sora-chan, Miu-chan and Hina were by my side; because there were people that I wanted to protect, so that's how I struggled through the toughest times.

If things weren't so, I might have left college ages ago.

In the end, I originally had the determination to protect the children, but they became an important spiritual pillar to me instead.

Because of that, I have to be the one to protect them this time.

I promised myself strongly in my heart.

After a few days, we moved in immediately.

As we didn't even have much luggage, moving was completed in a flash. Next we probably had to decide which room I was going to sleep in.

But about this point, it's probably better to just go with the flow. This is already our home, after all.

And for some reason, I even felt that I went back to the place that I should stay at.

"Oi-tan, where's Hina's doll?"

"Eh? Oh, I recall that it should be in the box over there…… Errr, wait a sec."

"Mnn?"

"Didn't I tell you not to call me Oi-tan, but Papa?"

"Eh~ I don't wanna~"

Don't want to…… That's quite hurtful.

"Oi-tan is Oi-tan."

"Why…… We weren't like that on Parents' Day…… Didn't we ascertain our family ties or something like that?"

"So Oji-san is actually more hot-blooded than we thought."

"Even Miu-chan…… Err, what are you doing?"

Miu-chan was writing out something on the table seriously.

"This? These are the rules that Oji-san has to follow while living with us."

"Let me see…… 'The washroom can only be used an hour after the girls finish using it', why is

it still this!?"

"There's actually a lot more. For example: 'Stay two meters away from the washroom when the girls are using the bathroom.'."

"What is this!? And even the toilet is in the range if things are like that! What do I do during that time!"

"Please endure, or you can go to a nearby convenience store."

That's so hurtful.

At the instant I felt downcast because of uneasiness for the future, I saw Sora-chan drawing out a line with duct tape on the corridors.

"Though I have a bad feeling about this, I still have to ask. What is this used for?"

"Phew…… Onii-chan, you can't cross the line without permission."

"Ugh! It's really true!"

What is this! Isn't this the same as the time we started!

"You girls! Get rid of the strange rules and the boundary line at the corridors! After clearing them away, gather over here! I have something important to announce!"

"Onee-chan, isn't it better to draw it clearer there?"

"Ah, that's right as well."

"Hina is hungry."

They completely ignored my words.

"Ugh….. You girls……"

At these times, I must say things clearly from the start.

As the oldest person here, as the head of the family, and the most important part, as the three sisters' Papa—

"Girls, listen to your Papa!"

"…… What Papa."

Sora looked at the agitated Yuuta who looked rather happy.

"The future is really full of hardships, Onee-chan."

Miu's mischievous expression made Sora feel somewhat displeased. Sora recalled the time she first met her Onii-chan a few years ago.

That time, Onii-chan appeared before her in a situation Sora didn't know what to do as well.

And it might just be because Yuri-san is Onii-chan's sister that Sora liked her so much.

"Ah~ It seems that Oji-san is going to become my first love as well. Hina as well, right?"

"Ugh, ehhh—!?"

Seeing her sister's shocked expression, Miu laughed happily.

"Onee-chan is so gullible~ Hahaha!"

"Miu! Don't tease Onee-chan!"

Even though she pretended to be angry, Sora was quite clear about her flushed expression.

Just at that moment, the electric doorbell rang at the entrance.

It was probably the three from the Road Observation Research Society who said that they wanted to help.

…… Raika-san probably came as well; I feel a bit inferior when facing her, she thought in her heart.

Even so, Yuuta who completely doesn't understand the heart of a girl shouted once again:

"Girls, listen to Papa!"

Sora couldn't help but snap at that moment:

"I definitely won't call you Papa!"

Yuuta…… Calling him that might be quite nice……

However, Yuuta who was completely oblivious of Sora's thoughts and could only feel the dejection from the sidelines—

Afterword

Every time I finish writing a novel, I would repeatedly ask myself: Is it really okay like this? Would the readers enjoy it? In the end, I would grab my favorite manga or novel, trying to reinvigorate myself, but when I don't even have the time to do that, I would sate my apetite. Yesterday, I ran to a nearby restaurant late at night to buy fried rice with the logo of the shop printed on it, mango juice and so on, and gorged on it by myself the whole night.

Just like that, at these times when the weather is getting cold, I feel rather uneasy that I still have a few winter clothes that I can wear.

So writing novels can make you fatter…… I didn't know that.

A new series has started! I express my deepest thanks to the readers who bought this book, I am Matsu Tomohiro.

And the readers who are selecting books at bookshops, please bring this book to the counter, you will definitely not regret it.

Though I understand that starting a new series when 'Mayoi Neko Over Run' is still running is a gamble, but having Nakajima Yuka-sensei draw the illustrations is a rare occasion, so I placed reason aside, and grabbed the chance.

Of course, about the 'Mayoi Neko' series, I adjusted the speed with Peco-sensei, and I would decrease the speed to three or four books a year, and I only have to write with the speed of one book each month, it feels like I can finish three books apiece for each series…… Probably. Though I would seem somewhat diffident saying that, I just couldn't miss the chance of having a collaboration with my favorite illustrator, so I feel like trying.

And just like that, I wrote 'Papa no Iu Koto o Kikinasai!' hoping that the readers of 'Mayoi Neko Over Run!' would like it, and the readers who don't like 'Mayoi Neko Over Run!' would like it as well.

Though the first episode is to write out the story of their encounter, it is planned that the story will become better, developing in the direction of family life and love.

I wish that in this work, I can present the cuteness of girls other than Fumino and co. to the readers.

And then, I'll introduce to the readers Nakajima Yuka-sensei who drew the illustrations for this work, a famous artist in the doujinshi world. This artist who usually avoids taking part in commercial works in the past finally accepted the job after sincere pleas and getting to know the

content of the work was a miracle.

And I am prepared to present to the readers the first commercial work of Nakajima Yuka-sensei.

And finally, I have to thank all of the people who helped to publish this work.

And the most important thing is to express my deepest gratitude to you who read this work.

If you are willing to continue to read the works after this, it will be an inexpressible happiness and honor for me.

Matsu Tomohiro

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ **Stamina Bento:** A stamina bento is a bento set which is energy focused and high in calories. Meat, vegetables and egg can normally be found in one.

2. ↑ **Su-Udon:** Su-udon is Kake-udon.

3. ↑ **Making Ichigo (Strawberry) Daifuku:** You can make one yourself too! Check out a video here.

4. ↑ **The world has become white:** Yuuta is saying he has 'seen' too much mochi since mochi is white.

5. ↑ **Brunch:** Breakfast + Lunch = Brunch.

6. ↑ There's a word pun in this, the first word in Road Research is the same as the first word in lolicon. You can just treat this as Roary -> Loli, since r and l are blurred in Japanese anyways.

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